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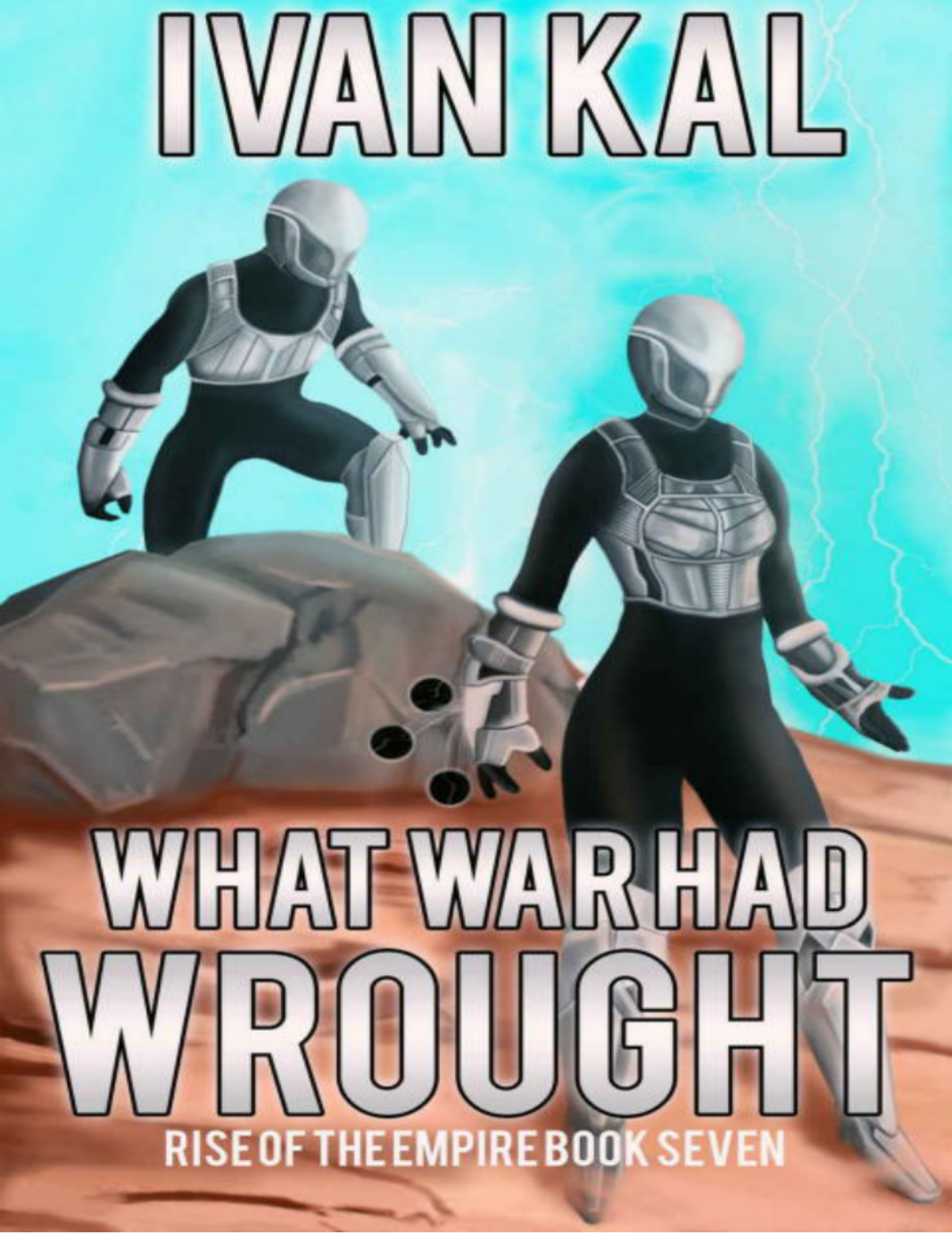

WHAT WAR HAD WROUGHT

RISE OF THE EMPIRE BOOK SEVEN

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Erasi and the Shara Daim are at war.

The Shara Daim Legions stopped the Erasi fleets from pushing further into their territory, and with the invasion halted a lull in the war gives the Empire time to seek a diplomatic solution on behalf of their new ally. But the Erasi are stalling the diplomatic talks, and the Shara Daim are not willing to wait for long before launching an offensive to take back their systems. The Erasi are master manipulators, and while they feign interest in a peaceful resolution, a massive force from their core is gathering, commanded by one of the founders of the Erasi.

Anessa, ruler of the Shara Daim, and Adrian, Lord Sentinel of the Empire, are forced to plan for a defense against a force that outnumbers them almost three to one. Hoping to stall the Erasi advance long enough for their advanced technology to make a difference.

***What War Had Wrought* is book 7 in the "Rise of the Empire" series, an epic story that follows humanity as it grows from a single world to ultimately becoming a galaxy wide empire.**

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Ivan Kal
WHAT WAR HAD WROUGHT

Timeline

November 2103 – A faction of humanity—Olympus—leaves to colonize a planet in a star system 600 light years from Earth.

February 2159 – An alien race called the Ra'a'zani conquers Earth.

May 2164 – Olympus arrives at their destination; they name the planet Sanctuary. They get involved in a conflict against an alien race called the Sowir. Ally themselves with the Nel of Nuva.

March 2170 – Resistance from Earth contacts Olympus on Sanctuary, asking for aid.

December 2171 – Olympus and Sowir Dominion make a pact of non-aggression.

January 2172 – Olympus fleet arrives in the Sol system, engaging Ra'a'zani forces in the system. The battle for Earth results in narrow human victory, but the cost is the Earth. Ra'a'zani weapon makes the planet uninhabitable.

March 2172 – Year 1 of the Empire – Tomas Klein, leader of Olympus, creates the Empire.

December – Year 30 of the Empire – Sowir attack Nelus system, homeworld of the Nel. Empire breaks the non-aggression pact with Sowir by simultaneously sending aid to Nelus and invading the Sowir territory. Clan Leader Adrian Farkas overuses the Watchtower command interface, falling into a coma.

January–March Year 31 of the Empire – Adrian Farkas wakes up and hears the telepathic beacon from the sphere left by the originator of the human and Nel races, unlocking all the knowledge and technology contained inside.

March Year 36 of the Empire – Empire wins the war against the Sowir.

Year 36–Year 54 of the Empire – Empire at peace, focusing on exploring, developing technologies from the sphere of the People, expanding their borders to reclaim Sol.

June Year 54 of the Empire – Empire meets an alien race called the Erasi.

July Year 54 of the Empire – Lord Sentinel Adrian Farkas meets Dai Sha Anessa of the Shara Daim, the third race created by Axull Darr. Anessa attempts to capture Adrian; the fight ends in narrow victory for Adrian and his people. They take the Dai Sha prisoner.

January Year 55 of the Empire – Shara Daim Elders recall all of their forces for an attack on the Empire, seeking the device left by Axull Darr.

June Year 55 of the Empire – Lord Sentinel releases Dai Sha

Anessa.

August Year 55 of the Empire – The Empire defeats the Ra'a'zani, leaving their people abandoned on their worlds with no way of getting back into space.

September Year 55 of the Empire – Three Shara Daim Legions attack Sol. Lord Sentinel defends, and defeats the invading forces, allowing Dai Sha Anessa and her remaining forces to leave Sol.

December Year 55 of the Empire – Erasi invade Shara Daim territory.

September Year 56 of the Empire – After finding out about a conspiracy by the Elders of the Shara Daim, Dai Sha Anessa removes them from power, taking the rule of the Shara Daim for herself, claiming the title Kar Daim.

March Year 57 of the Empire – Shara Daim reach out to the Empire, inviting Lord Sentinel to their homeworld Shara Radum for diplomatic talks.

June Year 57 of the Empire – Empire diplomatic task force is ambushed by the Erasi on their way to Shara Daim homeworld. One battleship is destroyed, but the rest of the taskforce manages to escape.

July Year 57 of the Empire – The Empire and the Shara Daim reach an agreement, forming an alliance. The Empire obligated to help the Shara Daim against the Erasi invasion.

November Year 57 of the Empire – A large Erasi force is detected at the border of the Shara Daim, more than one hundred fleets moving to reinforce the Erasi invasion.

Prologue

February; Year 58 of the Empire — Warpath system — Secret Base

Emperor Tomas Klein stepped off the shuttle and onto the Warpath base. A Nel man was waiting close by, and Tomas made his way towards him. Once he was close enough, Tomas raised his palm to his chest and made a Nel gesture for greeting, which the man returned.

"How long can you stay?" Clan Leader Isani asked.

"A day. Jusan is covering for me at Waypoint. No one should notice that I'm gone," Tomas responded.

Isani gestured and led Tomas deeper into the complex. "You didn't need to come in person, I could've updated you on everything at Sanctuary."

"More than a decade had passed since we recovered it; I need to see it in person," Tomas said as Isani led him through a corridor leading deeper into the asteroid—a small planetoid, really. The walls were uneven rock, with lights mounted on the ceiling. They made their way past several doors and intersections, and eventually they stepped out of the corridor and into a large viewing room. Much like the similarly designed viewing rooms on Warpath's Forge, an entire wall was see-through, and beyond it stretched a large cavern hollowed out inside the asteroid. Only this cavern was more of a large hole drilled into the side of the asteroid than it was a cavern. The 'entrance' to it was almost 200 kilometers in diameter, with the 'cavern' being some 300 kilometers deep and 200 wide, and it had to be, because of its purpose.

The asteroid itself was on the other side of the system from the three asteroids that together formed Warpath's principal city. It was also a secret known only to those working here, Tomas, and a few select people from Clan Dai Ven. And the Hand of the Empire, for there was no secret that the Hand wasn't privy to and no place in the Empire that they didn't have access to. The asteroids beyond obscured the view inside through the large entrance, and more large rocks had been moved in front of it to make it impossible to see inside the large cavern from anywhere else in the system.

The two made their way to the end of the room and looked at the large cavern. A massive object dominated the view. It was 168 kilometers long and 76 kilometers in diameter at its widest. It was a ship, with a black-and-silver smooth, glistening hull. Its front was a six-sided pyramid with wavy sides that widened and melted at the back into a half sphere that covered the back end, making it look almost like some kind of an abstract teardrop.

“Damn, it’s more impressive in person,” Tomas said.

“It is, but wait until you see inside,” Isani said, and gestured for them to continue walking. They turned and exited the viewing room through one of the side doors, and entered a small landing bay with several shuttles arranged in a line.

“You know, we could’ve just had my shuttle land in this bay,” Tomas commented lightly as they made their way towards one of the shuttles that was already primed and waiting for them.

“You wanted heightened security. The same protocols apply for everyone,” Isani responded seriously.

“Of course,” Tomas conceded.

They boarded the shuttle and it took them the rest of the way. The large ship filled the shuttle’s viewers, and as they approached the back end of the ship, a portion of its hull seemed to flow away, the outer armor, leaving a smooth gray hull shaped like a circle maybe double the size of the shuttle. The pilot made his way directly towards that circle, and just as Tomas was about to question them speeding towards the ship’s hull, it parted in an iris-like motion with a soft blue light emanating from the inside.

Once the shuttle passed the hull, it closed back behind them, and Tomas could see the inside of the ship. They appeared to be in a landing bay of sorts, one with several levels, and completely inside the ship. The shuttle made its way towards the top level and landed beside another Warpath shuttle. Tomas exited the shuttle and squinted with his eyes in the strange light hue.

“I’m told that the lights here are a bit uncomfortable for humans; your eyesight is better than that of the People and something about this hue makes it harder for you to adjust, but you will in a couple of minutes,” Isani said as his secondary eyelids slid in place.

“I’ll manage,” Tomas said, and stepped among the people moving around the bay. Most stopped and saluted once they recognized Tomas, and he returned their salutes with a nod and a smile. Isani led Tomas to a wall on the far side of the bay that had several markings about as large as a person on it arranged in a row. They approached one of the markings and it slid open in much the same way the ship’s hull had.

The two stepped inside the cylinder-shaped chamber that was only two meters across and the wall closed them inside. Tomas noticed that the walls of the chamber conveyor were see-through; above them, he saw a tube-like route with a few openings in the sides of the tube, presumably leading to different parts of the ship. Isani approached a smooth black plate with silver markings on them and put his hand on one. Immediately, it flashed with blue light and they started moving through the tube. Tomas felt no acceleration; the quick

movements of the walls and passages outside of their chamber were the only clue that they were in fact moving.

Then, suddenly they were out in the open. The tube led their conveyor through the center of a large, spherical room. Tomas watched in amazement at the buildings and roads all around the walls of the room. There was even dark red vegetation and flowing water in between the buildings.

“Incredible,” Tomas said. He had known about the city, but it was nothing like seeing it in person. It reminded him a bit of the Guxcacul underground cities, only he knew that gravity was bent here in such a way that all the ‘walls’ were always the ‘floor.’ “I think that I can understand now why they called this ship the Enduring.” He looked around at the strange spiraling architecture, admiring the technology, knowledge, and artistry of its creators, and that was when he noticed shapes moving on the streets. Using his implants, he zoomed in and looked closely at one of them, a smooth sphere floating about a meter above the ground, with several tentacle-like limbs trailing behind it. It looked almost as if it was made of liquid.

“Are those…?” Tomas trailed off.

“Yes, the maintenance units,” Isani responded as he joined Tomas at the edge of the conveyor. “We stay mostly out of their way. We have access to their controls, but we don’t want to meddle with it. Their programming is obviously still functioning properly.”

Tomas nodded in understanding just as their tube reached the end of the room and plunged into another tunnel. They made a few sharp turns and then finally came to a stop a few minutes after. The front of the cylinder flowed open, followed by the iris-like movement of the wall, revealing a medium-sized room. They stepped inside and Tomas looked around. Most of the room was filled with workstations that obviously didn’t belong there—they were Empire technology, and all of them had cables stretched from them to the walls attached to seemingly nothing. A few of the workstations had cables leading to the middle of the room, attached to an ornate blue-and-black chair that seemed to be made out of thousands of thin spiral-like smooth branches melded into a shape of a chair.

From previous reports, Tomas knew that that was the true heart of the vessel, the command hub from which a single person could command the entire ship. Only to date they hadn’t managed to use it successfully, not as it was intended to be used.

“Have you made any progress?” Tomas asked, gesturing at the stations.

“Some. We have limited control of the drives. We can move the ship, but any kind of advanced maneuvering requires a person in the chair,” Isani answered.

“And you still haven’t had any success in making that viable?”

“No. Anyone can take command of the ship from here, but they still can’t do it for more than half an hour, and they need to focus only on one thing at a time. The strain is too great,” Isani said.

“Didn’t one of your reports mention a way for you to reduce the strain?” Tomas asked. He remembered reading that they were trying to implement a few tricks that they used in their Watchtower interface. According to the people working on this interface, the Empire’s Watchtower was both more advanced and inferior at the same time. This interface put all the strain on the user’s brain, while Watchtower used AI-guided computers and adaptive software to reduce the strain on the user.

“We abandoned that; we can’t even begin to understand how this thing works, not really. The only reason we can use it is because of our genetics; if anyone other than a Nel or a human tried, they would’ve fried their brains. The only one that might be able to take the strain for longer is Adrian,” Isani said pointedly.

Tomas nodded in understanding. Everything around him was so far ahead of anything that the Empire was capable of, so much so that it was laughable that he had thought that they might be able to tweak some aspect of the ship. This was the vessel of Axull Darr, his ship, his home. The labs on this ship were the true origin of Nel, humans, and Shara Daim. It had once been the People’s World-ship, a home to many, and as the People died off, it had become Axull Darr’s home. It was the pinnacle of their technological advancement.

“So,” Isani said, “why are you really here?”

“Because of Adrian,” Tomas said.

Isani twisted his palm in a gesture of curiosity. “Are you going to finally tell him about this?”

“No, I kept this from everyone for a very good reason, and you know that,” Tomas said.

Tomas had learned the location of the ship a decade ago from Axull Darr. The copy of their ancestor had told him everything—about the thing they’d created, about how they’d failed, how they’d contained them, and most importantly, the locations of the People’s remnants, this ship included. And Tomas had asked him to keep quiet about it while he pretended to not know. Now Axull Darr had revealed a few things to Adrian, and Tomas still didn’t know why he had done that, but at least he hadn’t told him the other things.

Tomas had studied the People, from Axull Darr’s stories and from records that Axull Darr made available only to him as the ruler of the Empire. He knew why they lost, why they couldn’t defeat their mistake. And he wasn’t going to allow the Empire to follow in the same footsteps. That was why the Empire didn’t copy technologies

from the sphere, but learned and adapted and improved them to fit into their ways. They had been improving technologies of the equivalent level, of course—nothing like this ship. However, already there were breakthroughs, new paths that the People had never explored.

The People were crippled, in a way, by the fact that they were alone for so long, the only intelligent life in the galaxy. They'd had no competition, no way to see paths different than their own. And by the time other life joined them, they were so far ahead of them that they didn't bother to learn from those who had different ideas than them. They looked at them as children, a stance that was not very far from truth.

Tomas had hidden this ship because he knew that if his people knew about it, they wouldn't be able to resist the temptation. It was one thing to learn advanced technologies from records, to advance slowly with full understanding, and quite another to have the final goal in front of you, within reach with almost no effort. They would study the ship, copy technologies, jump so far ahead that they would've matched the People in a few hundred or less years. This ship was equipped with everything they needed. It could build materials that they could only dream about now, assemble ships smaller than their shuttles that could take on an entire fleet of the Empire's ships of the line. They could have all the technology of the People in their hands.

But that would cripple them too. For all of their technology and knowledge, the People had failed. Failed to stop what they unleashed, and failed to stop themselves from dying. And Tomas was not going to let that happen to the Empire. They would use their ancestors' technology only as a rough guideline, as inspiration for the things that would surpass their ancestors. Tomas wanted the Empire to struggle, to be challenged by other races in the galaxy, to grow from those interactions. But this ship was a lifeline, a thing that he would consider using only as a last resort to preserve the Empire. That was the only way they could surpass their ancestors fast enough. The People had had no rival to push them forward; they had done everything on their own over an insane amount of time. And Tomas knew from Earth's history that conflict and struggle were the only way for them to catch up faster and also grow more than their ancestors ever did, even though growing might hurt more than if they simply used the People's technology.

"So what is the real reason?" Isani asked.

"Adrian asked me to choose a replacement for him as the Lord Sentinel," Tomas said, turning to look at the Clan Leader. "But there isn't really a need for that; the only obstacle is that he wouldn't be

able to be on Mars for some time. The Sentinels don't need his constant oversight; they were designed to be independent and to operate outside of the Empire. But he still needs to be reachable for any emergencies and discussions. So I was thinking of giving him a mobile base, one that can accommodate all of his needs and staff, and can move fast from Shara Radum to Sol."

Isani bent the fingers of his left hand in a gesture that signaled alarm. "You are not thinking of giving him this ship?"

Tomas laughed. "No, of course not. I wanted to see if you might be able to speed up Project Sovereign."

"I don't see how that would allow him to move faster than with the ship he already has," Isani said.

"You forget, Axull Darr put the Shara Daim on Shara Radum, and just like in Sol and Nelus, he built an access point in the system's sun, and Sovereign ships will be able to use them," Tomas said.

"Of course, but you know that we are a long way from even finishing the prototype. We could do it faster if you allowed us to use this ship's manufacturing capabilities," Isani said.

"No. If I give in to that, I might as well let you copy technologies from it. Everything needs to be built by our hands and our technologies," Tomas said sternly.

"How much faster were you thinking?" Isani asked.

"A year," Tomas said.

"Impossible. Projections put it at ten years before we finish everything, maybe more now that we are funneling all our resources into increasing the number of our fleets. Half of the resources we were sending here are now rerouted to the Forge. You can't rush this, Tomas, not if you want a ship with a hull strong enough to survive passing through an access point. And if you don't want us using this ship, then it will take time until we can manufacture enough compressed matter for even one ship," Isani said.

Tomas grimaced in annoyance. "And if I get you resources? More people, more experts?"

"Even if we can halve the time needed, it will still be too long, Tomas," Isani said.

"We need this, Isani. I don't want us relying on the People's technologies, but access points are one of their more advanced technologies that we can make use of even if we can't build them. With our advances in compressed matter, we can survive going through their access points. Just barely, but that is enough," Tomas said, and shook his head, suddenly feeling a great weight on his shoulders. "We are spread too much, Isani." Tomas continued wearily. "And we don't have the infrastructure of other civilizations. They had years developing and expanding slowly; their outer territories are

mostly self-sufficient. Ours rely mostly on our core, and we are expanding too fast. Unless we can have ships traveling much faster across the Empire than even with the skim drives, we will have problems."

"I know," Isani said. "But unless you want us to use our ancestors' technology, you will have to be patient."

"No, I don't want that. You have seen the records; it will do us no good following in their footsteps. And you've seen what alterations Axull Darr did to this ship for their battles with their enemy. They are laughable; all that technology and they failed because they didn't know how to fight. If Adrian was in Axull Darr's place, the enemy never would've had spread so much, even if he only had this ship's technology at his disposal. This ship's weapons aren't weapons, they are glorified tools. Tools advanced enough that they could wipe out every single ship in the Empire, but still only tools. None were truly designed for warfare. Their enemy adapted, changed; their technology went beyond the People in directions they never explored. We need to advance beyond them, to build up technologies that they neglected and found no use for," Tomas said.

"We will, Tomas. We have time. The People's countermeasure has kept the enemy contained for a long time; it will not fail before we are ready," Isani said.

"I know. I just hope that we survive long enough to become ready," Tomas said. "Now let's continue with a tour of the ship, I am eager to see all of it."

Chapter One

Shara Radum

Adrian stood in the landing bay of the Veritas, watching the shuttle from one of the Empire's ships that had just arrived in the Shara Radum system land and then the doors of the bay close, with air being cycled back into the room. As soon as it finished, Adrian entered the bay and walked towards the shuttle to meet the person just then coming out of it.

"Teacher," Adrian greeted the taller Sowir, Lurker of the Depths, telepathically.

"Adrian," Lurker of the Depths returned.

Lurker of the Depths had just arrived with six of the Empire's fleets, and had brought with him his construction ships from Sol, as well as some cargo ships carrying materials so that they and the fleet auxiliaries could meet the needs of the fleets.

"Come, let us move somewhere more private," Adrian sent, and made his way through his ship towards his rooms. Once there, he took one chair and the Sowir curled his three tentacle-like legs and lowered himself on the floor.

"I hope that you've brought everything that you will need," Adrian sent.

"Most. A few shipments of materials are lagging behind, but they will be sent here from Sol." Lurker of the Depths responded.

"Did you bring me what I asked for?"

"Yes, although we had some difficulties making them. They are still too large to be fired from current war vessels without significant retrofits," Lurker of the Depths sent.

"Pods or cargo ships?" Adrian asked.

"Cargo ships. They are too large to fit a reasonable number into the pods."

Adrian grimaced. **"I had hoped for pods; bringing cargo ships into a battle will be an extra worry."**

"We cannot yet reduce the skim drives sufficiently in size, and we still need a fairly large battery in order to run them. Coupled with the targeting systems and the receiver, we cannot reduce them in size any more than we already have. And they are resource costly; I don't know if they will be as useful as they are time- and resource-consuming," Lurker of the Depths sent.

"Still, they are powerful weapons, ones that our enemies don't know about," Adrian said.

"Perhaps… it is something that is easily deduced. If you can move your ships faster than light within the system, why

shouldn't your missiles have the same capability?"

"It is one thing to suspect something and quite another to face it in combat," Adrian sent. **"How many did you bring?"**

"Twelve hundred."

"I hoped for more…"

"I have brought everything we need to build more, but if you want my ships to build more of the missiles, the production of the defense platforms will suffer," Lurker of the Depths said.

"I'll think about it. In the meantime, Kar Daim has given us one small moon to set up as a temporary base for our people as well as a more permanent embassy. I want you to start placing modules on the ground as soon as possible; put the personnel areas and living quarters down first. Shara Radum might be changing, but there is still friction; I would much rather our people had a place where they can take leave without worrying about offending some Shara Daim."

"Of course, we can start right away," Lurker of the Depths sent.

"Good. I'm afraid that we will need to keep your people away from the Shara Daim. They might have started a change, but there is still thousands of years of them looking down on other intelligent life. I hope to have you by my side when we go to the front; hopefully your presence will be a good experience for them."

"I understand," Lurker of the Depths sent.

Adrian felt the weight of those words; he knew that the Sowir might understand that more than anyone else. **"Of course."**

"When will our forces go to the front?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

Adrian shook his head as he answered, **"I don't know yet. Our stealth scouts have been scouting out Erasi forces and relaying information to the Shara Daim, who have managed to regain a few systems and halt the Erasi advance. There haven't been any new large-scale battles in months; the Erasi are content to hold and reinforce the systems they have already taken, while the Shara Daim are preparing for a push to recover their territory. The Emperor has asked us to hold off on sending fleets until our people can finish our talks with the Erasi. The Erasi are trying to clear the air about their attack on my ships, which they call a minor incident, and want to repair the relations between us. Tomas is trying to get them to pull back from the Shara Daim territory and pay restitution to both the Empire and Shara Daim."**

"I doubt that they will agree to that; they planned this attack long before we came into the picture. And I also doubt that Kar

Daim will be amenable to just letting the Erasi get away without paying in blood," Lurker of the Depths added.

Adrian grimaced. **"Yeah, I talked with her about it. She wants them to pay, but I managed to convince her that termination of hostilities is in her people's best interest. Although the price she will ask if they agree is substantial. As for the Erasi, I agree, but we still want to give them a chance. It has been made clear to them that if they continue with their aggression against the Shara Daim, we will respond by providing aid and technology as well as declaring a state of war between us and the Erasi, which will mean us stopping all trading with their companies. I think that they are hesitating because of that, if nothing else. The Erasi are not like the Empire, and some of their companies have a lot to lose if we go to war. Our diplomats think that the companies are putting pressure on the Erasi ruling caste."**

"But you still don't think that they will agree and pull back?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

"No. As you said, they had planned this for a long time. And with everything we have learned about them, we know that they like to meddle and influence other civilizations in order to eliminate threats. They were not able to influence the Shara Daim because they are a very xenophobic civilization—the Erasi couldn't get a great enough foothold to manipulate them—and they were far too powerful to be taken out easily. I suspect that the Erasi had a hand in manipulating other races around the Shara Daim to breed distrust and resentment against them—although I doubt that they needed to apply much effort—so that when they finally struck, the Shara Daim would be alone," Adrian responded.

"Plausible, but not certain. We don't know their true motives and should not allow ourselves to believe assumptions. That could lead to false conclusions. My people have learned that lesson well."

"You're right. Hopefully our diplomatic talks with them will give us more clues about their true motives."

Chapter Two

One month later; March; Year 58 of the Empire — Tarabat

Aileen stormed into the Empire's compound on Tarabat furious, followed by two Warpath adepts trained in Sha recently sent from Sanctuary to act as additional support. Once inside, she made her way to one of the offices and entered, leaving the two adepts on their own. Inside, she was met by the compound head Björn Borg, who waited for her to drop onto one of the couches that was against the side wall before speaking.

"That bad, huh?" Björn asked.

"I hate this kind of politics where you say one thing but mean something completely different, giving half-truths and twisting words for your benefit. The Empire got rid of those politics a long time ago, but the Erasi are such a jumbled mess of agendas, corruption, and manipulations that I don't know how they even function," Aileen said tiredly.

"Well, they are a jumbled mess of many races, corporations, and ideologies," Björn said.

"Ugh," Aileen grunted. "They are blocking me, stalling for something, and I can't figure out what!" She raised her voice. "I can't figure out if they are really concerned with our threats or if they are pretending to be! And I certainly can't figure out what they want!"

"The Shara Daim will not wait for long. If the Erasi don't agree to terms, they will attack to regain their worlds and people; they won't allow the Erasi any more time to set up defenses," Björn cautioned.

"I know, which is why I am so frustrated. We have two more months until the Emperor's deadline, and I doubt that Erasi will somehow miss us leaving Tarabat. They'll know that we are stopping with negotiations," Aileen said.

"What about our other channels?" Björn asked.

"Our contacts are too far down the ladder to know anything useful. We didn't really have time to make a good net," Aileen said.

"And companies?"

"The company leaders assure me that they will not allow their government to go to war with us. They don't really care for the Shara Daim, as they never really had many deals with them. But we have proven ourselves as fair and secure trading partners. And our economy is growing; we are an investment, a pretty large and potentially very lucrative one," Aileen said.

"But you don't think that they will manage to sway the Erasi government," Björn said.

"No, I think that the companies have a lot of sway in the Erasi,

sure, but we have been dealing with mostly midlevel companies in the outer sectors of the Erasi. Their larger and more influential companies are in the core, and I doubt that they will care."

"So you think that continuation of the war is inevitable."

"Sadly, yes. I don't think that the Erasi government really cares that much about us. They look at us as a minor player."

Björn nodded, agreeing with her words. "So what are you planning to do?"

Aileen stood and started for the exit. "I'm going to go and find out as much as I can before we pull out."

* * *

Several hours later, Aileen entered a familiar little establishment on the other side of the planet. She had taken a transport to this particular dome city. She waved to the alien standing in the first room and made her way to the back room. The short Hav recognized her and simply acknowledged by returning her wave with one of its appendages.

Aileen entered the back room, stepped into smoke up to her hip, and waited for Jurr to arrive. The Hav in the front would let him know that she was here. Several minutes later, Aileen felt someone approach, and the smoke's surface rippled and a large snake-like head and body rose above it.

"Jurr," Aileen sent.

"Sentinel," Jurr greeted her. **"How may I aid you? We did not have a meeting scheduled today."**

"The Erasi negotiators that I have been dealing with are stalling our talks. I need to know why," Aileen sent.

Jurr dipped his large triangular head. **"My contacts on Tarabat tell me that the companies are speaking with the core, urging them to stop the aggression against the Shara Daim and your Empire. The delay could simply be because of the distance between the core and Tarabat,"** Jurr sent, but Aileen felt that there was more.

"But you think that there is something else?"

"All of my contacts in the core have gone silent. And I have received reports of strange movements across the Erasi—cargo, supplies, warships. Ships from the smaller members of the Erasi suddenly leaving on classified missions."

"Why is that strange? They have fleets in Shara Daim territory, they need to keep them supplied," Aileen said.

"Yes, but the amounts that they are moving are greater than

what their fleets require," Jurr sent.

"That could mean that they are expecting reinforcements…" Aileen said.

"If they are, they have gone to great length to conceal the movements of those reinforcements."

Aileen nodded absentmindedly. **"Anything else?"**

"Your people have asked me to share any information about Weaver Hanaru, should I learn of it," Jurr said, and Aileen immediately paid more attention. Weaver Hanaru was the one that had ambushed Adrian and his ships on their way to Shara Radum. The Emperor was adamant on having the Gatrey face judgment for the deaths he was responsible for.

"You know where he is?" Aileen asked. The Weaver had disappeared after the skirmish with the Empire's ships.

"I know where he was several days ago," Jurr answered. **"He was spotted arriving in Halros system, replacing his damaged ships and picking up several cargo ships that had arrived from the core last month. After that, he departed the system in the anti-spinward direction."**

Aileen did a quick check with her implant and found out where exactly the Halros system was located. She frowned when she saw that it was in fact close to the Erasi border on the Empire's side, away from the Shara Daim.

"Why would he go anti-spinward? The only thing in that direction is the Empire's territory, and I doubt that he wants to turn himself in to us," Aileen wondered, more for her own benefit than Jurr's.

"I do not know, but he did not report to Tarabat and the regional government. Following his skirmish with your ships, he disappeared. This was his first sighting in months," Jurr added.

"Thank you. I will relay the information to my people," Aileen said.

"This is the least that I can do for you curing and sheltering the last of my people," Jurr said, then slowly disappeared into the tunnels leading to the underground portion of the domed city.

Chapter Three

Erasi Devastator End of Hope — Unknown system

Garash, O'fa of the Erasi, sat on the ground in his private sanctum. A large boulder—brought by him from his people's homeworld before it was taken from them—was held in the air in front of him by the brute strength of his psionic power. Most life had potential to tap into the psionic energy that filled the Universe. Some were more connected to it and others less; some could manipulate that energy and others could only feel it or use it to augment their own senses. Different people called this power different things—psionic energy, dark energy, Sha. Nevertheless, all intelligent life had the potential to feel it, even if only subconsciously; all were connected to it, even if they didn't know it.

Different races had different strengths, different ranges of access to the psionic energy. It was still a mystery as to why most lifeforms eventually evolved psionic abilities, and why there were races that evolved them without any apparent need, yet all life that was classified as intelligent had psionics—whether they had conscious control of them or not was irrelevant. But then again, the scientists still couldn't figure out why many races of the galaxy looked similar.

Most races separated the psionic abilities into three categories—external manifestation, internal manifestation, and mind manifestation. It had also been noted that those races that had somehow evolved to resemble each other were the ones that gained psionic abilities across all categories, while those that were truly different and more shaped by their environment usually developed abilities from only one or perhaps two categories, and are always very strong in them. A people that evolved telekinesis because they had no limbs that allowed them to use tools would naturally be able to do more than a being that had evolved it with no apparent reason. Garash had spent much of his long life trying to solve the reason behind this strange pattern unsuccessfully, but he knew that it was not just chance.

Garash's race, among all the races in the Erasi that possessed a conscious ability to manipulate psionic energy, was on the lower end in terms of power. But that was on the scale of an entire race; individuals could have more talent, could be born with a natural ability to wield that power, and given enough time and effort, even the weakest could become strong.

And Garash was old by standards of most races; he had taken his power and skill far beyond any other of his kind. Not all races could access all three areas, and it took many lifetimes for someone to

master even one of these disciplines. Garash had spent most of his life mastering the external manifestation of psionic power, the ability to affect the world around himself.

Any race that was even marginally advanced and intelligent found a way to extend life. Many found a way to do so indefinitely, whether by gaining the ability naturally through evolution or by using technology. Life extension drugs or treatments, genetic alterations, cybernetic enchantment, cloning and thought transference—all these methods allowed individuals a chance to become something great, to master the energy that held all the Universe together. Sadly, very few reached the age that Garash had; they would grow tired of living and let themselves die. They wasted the gift of life on trivial things. Choosing to simply survive, instead of trying to attain greatness.

Garash gently lowered the boulder to the platform in front of him. It had been the focus for his meditations for millennia; it was a reminder of why he did all the things that he did. Why he'd turned away from the ideals of peace that his ancestors preached, why he killed so many. The constant reminder of the black ships scourging his homeworld of life, unstoppable, unyielding, indestructible.

His people had at the time been a part of a Union of many races. In numbers, they had found strength and security. In time, they had dominated the entire region of space through trade and technology. The Union had been a peaceful community, one with enough power to repel any invader—until the black ships came. They'd moved and systematically wiped all life from the Union worlds, taking their time and settling their own on planets once populated by peaceful beings.

To encounter them meant death. The Union's ships, weapons, all of their combined technology of tens of thousands of years, was useless against them. It had no effect. They tried to slow them down, to give others time to evacuate and escape, but in the end, nothing mattered. The Union fractured, races that had trusted and lived together turned away from one another. Garash didn't blame them. He had done the same thing. He'd sent scouts across the galaxy, searching for a new home. A place where they could start again.

And he had found it on the other side of the galaxy. His people encountered the Gatrey and the Sorvani. Garash's people had then been called the Loraru—the children of the stars—but he gave them a new name, Uvaramo—those who remember. And remember they did. They built a new union, one that remembered the lessons of the past well. Together, they dominated their region of space, expanding, conquering. They used trade to bind races to them, and they manipulated and influenced those who could become threats from the shadows, making sure that there would never again be a threat that could do to them what the invaders had to the Union. And they made

sure that when all else failed, they had the military power to match any threat.

The Erasi had survived for a long time, had expanded and prospered by dealing with threats before they became too much to handle. And now they were forced to use their military power to face another threat—the Shara Daim. Once the Erasi had moved into this arm of the galaxy, they had met the Shara Daim, and immediately they'd realized what a threat they were. The usual measures were taken—the Erasi Weavers had tried to manipulate them, to create wars between them and other races, but the Shara Daim had always prevailed, their technology having advanced far too quickly, even for a warlike race. And their people proved almost impossible to turn.

So they'd tried to get at them in other ways. They had traded with them, tried to cripple them economically. And they had succeeded—constant wars with other races coupled with a bad economy weakened the Shara Daim—but still they refused to break. So Garash had no choice; an opponent of their size and strength could not be allowed time to surpass or match the Erasi. He called the other eight O'fa, those who together were the council of the Erasi, and argued for the last measure—a military offensive against the Shara Daim. It was not easy; many O'fa had grown complacent, more reliant on methods that required manipulations and attacks from the shadows. Their fears of weakening the rimward border even a little made them hesitate. But in the end, Garash had convinced them to allow him enough ships to end the Shara Daim threat once and for all.

And the time for the continuation of the offensive against the Shara Daim was near. Two or three more months and the last of the preparations would be finished and his fleets would finally join the forward force and put an end to the Shara Daim. He was only waiting for the last of the levies from the lower Erasi members to arrive. Each of the lower members in this sector had been called upon to 'donate' a force to his fleet. For the most part, their ships were far inferior, but a few of the members had tech that was close to that of the Erasi. The levy fleet would serve as a support for the fleet he'd brought from the core, and would be about half of the size of his fleet.

Garash stood and stretched his four arms above his head, shaking off his soreness. His meditation usually lasted for several hours. He then unfurled his mind from the containment that such meditations required and drank in the feel of his surroundings. Immediately, he noticed a mind standing at the entrance of his sanctum, and with a thought, he bade the young Ssarath near. The Ssarath slithered close to Garash, crossed her arms across her chest, and waited.

"What is it?" Garash asked. He knew that no one would there enter his sanctum while he was meditating unless it was important.

“Another devastator has arrived in system several hours ago, Commander,” the Ssarath said. Her people had only small telepathic abilities, but enough to speak with their minds. Garash turned and looked at the Ssarath, recognizing her as one of the bridge crew—Lorsee, her name came to him after a moment.

He could already feel his mood darken. **“Which one?”** Garash asked with his mind. There wasn’t supposed to be another one here. Garash had been given full control over the offensive, and while he was one of the founders, a council of the three founding races ruled the Erasi. Garash’s status as one of the O’fa—the ancient—gave him a lot of influence, but he was considered equal to the other O’fa; he couldn’t command another devastator.

The Ssarath hesitated just for a moment before speaking. **“Sojourn to the Stars,”** she sent.

Garash almost snarled at her, but contained himself; he knew that she was not to blame. The Gatrey in command of the Sojourn to the Stars and Garash did not see eye to eye often, and she had been opposed to the offensive against the Shara Daim in favor of more manipulations. But Garash would not allow have his plans to be meddled with, especially not by a mindbender like her.

The Ssarath continued aloud, “The O’fa Valanaru informed us that she wishes to speak with you; she is already on her way.”

“When will she arrive?” Garash asked.

“Ten minutes,” Ssarath said.

Garash narrowed his six eyes in anger. “Escort her here once she arrives,” he said, and turned around to wait as the Ssarath left, working hard to contain his anger. He did not like Valanaru, nor any of the Gatrey, for that matter. They had been useful once, but the older they got and the more powerful they were, the less he liked them. Gatrey had a natural talent with the mind psionics, and Valanaru was as old as Garash, which meant that she was extremely powerful. Certainly a more powerful telepath than him, although he was the more powerful one in the external manifestation psionics.

Garash’s people had abilities across all three categories, but his people had evolved only a very limited number of abilities in each, which was also the reason as to why they were weaker than those races that had more focused psionics. Garash had overcome his people’s weakness by dedicating himself to training his abilities over millennia. From the mind category, Garash only had limited telepathy; he could speak with other telepaths and look through their memories—a skill that had taken him far longer to learn than it would’ve taken a natural telepath—but he could do little else. However, all who studied the other two psionic categories had a distaste for the telepaths, but especially for mindbenders, those who were the most

elite and powerful telepaths. Because for all the power of the other psionic disciplines, it only took one slip, one moment in which your defenses were not adequate, and a mindbender could kill you with a thought. Thankfully, breaking through deep enough for that required both power and skill that few telepaths ever really attained, which was why those capable of that were called mindbenders.

Several minutes later, Garash felt a mind move through his ship, far before it ever came close. That was both the testament to Garash's strength and to Valanaru's, but it was also a sign that she was coming in peace; it was considered rude to shield one's presence while in another's home. The fact that Valanaru hadn't shielded her mind meant that she was not here to cause trouble, although with the Gatrey you could never really know for sure. Garash turned and watched the entrance to his sanctum before she glided inside, sitting cross-legged on a disk-shaped floating vehicle. The disk carrying her floated towards Garash, guided by a telepathic interface that allowed her control.

"Greetings, Son of Carnage," Valanaru sent, calling him by his earned name. Very few beings ever gained such a name, as it could only be bestowed by a telepath of great power, and it was given to those that had attained great power. It was more than a simple name, it was more like a title, one that reflected who you truly were, defining something about you that only a telepath could see. A name that told the world what you truly were.

Hearing Valanaru's voice in his head made Garash suppress the instinct to block his mind. He knew that simple communication wasn't enough to allow a mindbender power over you, but just knowing that the person in front of him could kill beings with her mind made him edgy. Of course, her ability to kill him before he could squash her telekinetically or shoot her with a weapon depended on how fast she could break through his defenses, but he didn't really want to test himself against her.

"Weaver," Garash greeted her, calling her by her earned name. Valanaru was *the Weaver* of the Erasi, the first one, the one who had created the organization, the greatest manipulator of them all. **"The council agreed to allow me control over this endeavor. Don't tell me that you managed to 'change' their minds,"** he sent pointedly.

"No, the council did not change its mind. But recent events have made them more cautious of the future," Valanaru sent.

"What events are you referring to?"

"The new Empire that has apparently allied itself with the Shara Daim," Valanaru sent.

"They are a minor empire. They have some impressive technology, I will admit that, but technology ultimately finds a

way. Our people now know that in-system FTL is possible; it is only a matter of time before we discover it. In the larger scheme of things, they are insignificant. They will not have enough time for their alliance to bear fruit. I will crush the Shara Daim before they can make a difference," Garash sent.

"The council is worried that you are underestimating this Empire. We know little of them, and they have shown technological superiority in several fields. Coupled with the psionic abilities that match those of the Shara Daim, the council believes that we need to proceed with a greater degree of caution. The true extent of Shara Daim psionic power was never documented; we only assume. And we cannot allow this endeavor to continue for too long. You drew forces from the rimward front, and I don't need to tell you that we cannot afford to have it weakened, Krashin will notice."

"Better that we weaken the front now and take care of the Shara Daim while they are still not our equal than to wait for them to attack us when they are ready. We would be in a worse position fighting two equal opponents on different sides of our territory," Garash argued. **"The council's thoughts are noted, but there is no need for them. I have already sent Weaver Hanaru on a mission that will make this small empire's further involvement moot. They will not be able to help the Shara Daim for long. Trust that I will conclude this offensive in a reasonable time period,"** Garash sent dismissively.

"The companies from this sector are putting pressure on the council; they do not want hostilities with the Empire," Valanaru sent.

"What they want is not important, dealing with the threats to the Erasi is. This empire is not a threat now, but it could become one if left alone for too long. My plan will deal with them."

"Of course, Garash, security of the Erasi comes above all other agendas. I am not here to stop your offensive, the council sent me only as an observer. They want this dealt with cleanly and efficiently. The blunder of Weaver Hanaru has already complicated things. I will stay on the sidelines and provide assistance only if it is needed," Valanaru sent.

Garash's upper eyes twitched in annoyance. He would need to put up with the Weaver for the duration of the war on Shara Daim, but that was a small price to pay for the council not interfering.

"Of course, Valanaru, you are welcome to join my fleet."

Chapter Four

Shara Radum

Adrian walked into a meeting room that was already full, followed closely behind by Sora. He had been on Lurker of the Depths' ship, overseeing the assembly of the command modules on the moon given to the Empire when Anessa had called him urgently to Shara Radum. Once he entered, Akash lifted his head from behind Anessa to look at him and then put it back down. The rest of the people present had varying reactions to his presence. Two of the three Dai Sha stiffened and refused to acknowledge him, but Adrian could understand that; he had killed their friend, after all. The third Dai Sha —Karoom of the Twenty Second Legion—greeted him with a professional nod of the head. The four Do Sun followed his lead and nodded as well. Anessa, on the other hand, greeted him with a short, warm smile, before it disappeared behind her professional Kar Daim face.

"There has been a development on the front," Anessa said, and gestured to the table in the middle of the room as Adrian came to stand next to her. "We have received a message from Dai Sha Garaam. One of your Empire's scout ships has made contact with her fleets, and delivered a frightening piece of information." Adrian felt Anessa reach out with her mind to the table's telepathic interface, and a moment later, a hologram came to life above it.

Adrian watched the recording of ships arriving in system—Erasi ships. The record was obviously sped up, and still there seemed to be no end to the Erasi ships. Eventually they stopped dropping out of hyperspace and made their way to a planet, where they took orbit. Over one hundred Erasi fleets were assembled, and among them one warship that was far larger than anything they'd thought the Erasi had.

"Where is this?" Adrian asked.

"On the Erasi side of the border, or where the border used to be. Here," Do Sun Arisak said, and the holo changed to show the map and exact location of the system.

"This is a problem, Adrian. We fought the Erasi to a standstill, and we have a good chance of routing the forces they have in our space. But not this—we can't stop this, not without help," Anessa said. Adrian could immediately feel the mood in the room turn sour. The two Dai Sha that disliked Adrian obviously did not like their ruler admitting that they needed help.

"The Empire can give you defensive platforms and scouts. But the Empire and the Erasi are still in talks; if we give you direct military

aid right now, there will be no hope of resolving this peacefully."

"Peacefully?" Dai Sha Horaas asked. "The Erasi need to pay for the lives they took, and for daring to attack the Shara Daim!"

"You think that your Legions can do that, against those numbers?" Adrian asked calmly.

"He won't like that," Iris chimed in in his head.

Dai Sha Horaas took a step towards Adrian, towering over him, but before he could do anything, Sora and Akash both growled.

"Told you."

"Enough!" Anessa said, glaring at Horaas, who after a moment bowed his head and took a step back. "We can't defeat those numbers," Anessa continued. "Not without losing a lot of territory and people." She then turned to Adrian. "The Erasi have already attacked your Empire; you must realize that they are stalling your talks to get that force ready to attack. They don't plan on accepting your Emperor's demands."

"I know, but in stalling us they are giving us time. If my people attacked with yours now, they would send those fleets whether they are ready or not. Time they take to dissuade the Empire from providing you with military aid is time that we can use to build more fleets that can help you against them," Adrian said.

"The best course of action would be for us to attack now," Anessa started. "Take back as much of our territory as possible and fortify it for that fleet. Unless they split it up, they will be forced to move through hyperspace, which will give us some more time than if they go through trans-space. If they do split them up, we will be able to ambush them, provided that we know where they are going. You should order your stealth ships to that system to monitor them."

"If you plan on restarting the fighting, you should do so only after we have eyes on them and after my people speak with the Erasi government, because they will certainly speed up their preparations once they get word that you attacked them," Adrian said. "I will send messages to Tarabat for our people to put more pressure on the Erasi government and tell them that you won't wait for them to deliberate and that you will stop the hostilities only if they agree to serious talks. Perhaps we can get more information out of them, if nothing else. But once that fleet starts to move, you will have my ships."

"That is acceptable," Anessa said.

* * *

Two hours later, Anessa and Adrian were in their quarters with Sora and Akash lying down in a corner of the room that had been

refurnished for them.

"You promised us aid against the Erasi; I can't understand why you are hesitating now. We planned to attack once your fleets arrived," Anessa said.

"Yes, but that was before we opened a diplomatic dialogue with them, and before we knew about those reinforcements. My six fleets will not make much difference," Adrian said.

"You know that they are stalling you. They will never bow to your demands," Anessa argued.

"I know, but they think that they are stalling us, when they are in fact giving us time. Time for your people to start using technologies that my people gave you."

"It will take more time for all my Legions to be retrofitted with your 'skim' drives than what they will give us," Anessa said, and then sat down on a Shara Daim-style backless sofa.

"You already have one Legion with the skim drives; others will be retrofitted, and even one of your Legions with skim ability is an asset," Adrian said. "Your shipyards are constructing ships as fast they can, and our fabricators—once they arrive—will speed up your ship construction considerably."

Anessa remained silent, thinking. Adrian could tell that there was something else bothering her.

"What is it?" Adrian asked.

She turned to look at him with her white eyes, her face expressionless. "My people don't like it when you challenge me, argue with me. Especially when in the presence of other Dai Sha," Anessa said.

Adrian nodded and knelt at her side. "I know. You are the ruler of Shara Daim, but I am the Lord Sentinel of the Empire. When you speak to me as Kar Daim of Shara Daim, I can only speak as the voice of the Emperor. I cannot answer you any other way."

"I understand that, it is they who do not," Anessa said, her expression turning grim. "I think that the Dai Sha's fear of me is lessening," she added. "Not all of them, but a few of the more powerful ones, the ones that were away when I killed the Elders and when you killed Farran. The stories that those present spoke are losing their effectiveness. There are even rumors that I bested Farran and gave the credit to you."

Adrian remained quiet. He could see that she was not finished.

Finally she spoke again. "I was trained to lead a Legion, and I believed that one day I would guide the Shara Daim as a respected Elder. But now I have taken the power for myself, and I forced my people to follow me. I did not inherit the title that was respected and owed fealty—I created a new one. Many followed simply because we

had the Erasi threatening our people, and I was strong. Now that we haven't had anything more than a small skirmish with the Erasi in months, the other Dai Sha have had time to think, and as I am very aware now, not many of them liked me all that much. How does your Emperor keep his power?"

Adrian sighed. "Tomas is a very different ruler than you, and the people of the Empire are a very different people than the Shara Daim. Tomas has very little personal power; all his power comes from the people. Those of us from Earth followed him because he promised us something better than what Earth at the time was. Those who were born into the Empire follow him because his legend has grown; Tomas had saved the people of Earth, he gave us a new start. Now, all follow him because he has given us equality. He has made sure that all, no matter who they were, can become whoever they wish to be. All have had equal opportunities, equal access to knowledge, and equal life standard at the beginning."

"How can they all be equal? Some must have more talent, some are smarter, others stronger than others," Anessa said.

"You misunderstood. Of course not everyone is equal in ability; what they are equal at is opportunity. Basic needs of everyone are always met; you don't need to work in order to have the basics of what is required for survival. Anyone can learn whatever he or she wants to learn, anyone can try to become whatever they want to become. There are no requirements for getting knowledge, but there are requirements necessary for getting a position. A person that is naturally more talented at something will pass those requirements much faster than someone who isn't, and even if the less talented person fails to meet those requirements, they will have a second chance," Adrian said.

"Does that not breed people who abuse your system, who fail constantly?" Anessa asked.

"Our people are raised to believe that their purpose in life is to seek to improve themselves and others in the Empire, through whatever path they decide on. But of course there are laws that prevent constant failing. If someone fails to meet requirements for their desired post twice, they will not be allowed to take those tests for a period of ten years, and for every next failure, another ten years are added to the wait time. In that time, they might decide to pursue other paths, or they might choose to survive on the bare minimum and prepare for the test. But we have the luxury of having that kind of system, as our people don't age."

"I still don't understand how your Emperor keeps his power," Anessa said.

"His way will not work for your people, not unless they change

drastically. Tomas has power because people gave it to him willingly. The Empire's founders trusted him to lead them because of many things, but the most important one was that they knew that he would never abuse their trust. That he would never work for personal gain. The generations that came after had inherited that trust from the older generations. He doesn't really rule like you do, he delegates between the Clan Leaders, who in turn rule their smaller territories. Each Clan has a different set of laws and customs, without breaching the broader Codes of the Empire. But the title of Emperor has power. He can order anyone to do anything, and he keeps that power because people trust that when he gives an order, it is for the good of all," Adrian said. "Tomas is a ruler that rules by the grace of his subjects; without the power they gave to him, he would have nothing. You need to decide what kind of a ruler you want to be. Will your people follow you if you appear weak? Will they accept your rule if you delegate it to others? How long will they follow you if they fear that you will kill anyone who doesn't agree with your rule?"

"Shara Daim are raised to follow strength," Anessa answered.

"But is them fearing you the same as them knowing that you are strong?" Adrian asked.

"I don't know any other way," Anessa said.

"You need to find one."

Anessa looked unsure, but Adrian could see that she had understood what he meant.

"Now, let's talk about something more pleasant," Adrian said, and walked over to the other side of the room where two large crates were placed against a wall. He picked up the one on the left. The crate was heavy, but with Adrian's enhanced strength it was relatively easy to lift, and he carried it over to Anessa, who stood and looked at him askance. "I have a gift for you," Adrian said with a smile.

"I wonder if she will like it," Iris said in Adrian's head.

"I think that she will," Adrian responded.

Anessa looked with interest at the crate, and yet Adrian could see a part of her hesitate.

"What is it?" Anessa asked.

Adrian just smiled and motioned for her to open it. Anessa knelt and slowly opened the top of the crate, revealing its contents.

"Is this…?" Anessa trailed off, confused.

"The Sentinel armor, an upgraded version to replace my old one. And that one was made for you," Adrian said, gesturing at the armor in the case.

Anessa looked at the contents of the crate, and Adrian saw that she was hesitant. "I know that you have your Shur At, which doubles as your combat armor," Adrian said, making Anessa turn her attention

back to him. “But the Shur At was never intended to be a combat armor; you copied it directly from the sphere, and the People used it as an EVA suit that could survive most any environment.”

“It has served us well,” Anessa said defensively.

“I know, but it wasn’t designed for combat. Its weapons are tools that the People used to cut samples. The only reason they are useful as weapons is because they are so advanced. The Sentinel armor, on the other hand, was designed as a combat suit. It has many features intended for combat.”

He could see Anessa thinking as she slowly reached with her hand to touch the torso plate.

“Let’s go to the training room and you can try it on,” Adrian said, hoping that she would see why the Sentinel armor was better once she put it on.

* * *

Anessa entered the training room carrying the crate in her hands, with Adrian following close behind her with his crate. She didn’t know how to react; she had never been given a gift before. She could see that Adrian was excited for her to have it, but she frankly wasn’t sure how useful the gift would be. She was used to the Shur At; it had been used by her people for a long time with much success. And yet, the warrior part of her was intrigued. The Empire had proven itself capable of devising many ingenious weapons.

Adrian put down his crate and walked over to her, gesturing for her to open her crate. Once she did, he reached down and pulled out the large chestplate.

“Let’s get this on you,” he said, and helped her put it over her head and over her upper torso. It took a bit of maneuvering with Anessa’s height, but they managed. She was forced to change her Shur At slightly so that it was completely skintight in order to put the armor on. Adrian then pulled out two pieces that were intended for her lower legs, and after them two pieces for her hands and forearms. The pieces over her hands were strange. On top of her hand there were hard metal plates, and on her palm some kind of malleable material. After they finished putting all the pieces in place, Adrian pulled out a small rectangular box and inserted it into a small slot beneath her arm.

“What is that?” Anessa asked.

“That is a cartridge containing NX-02; it is a formula devised by the People that contains concentrated energy. Injecting it will boost your strength and speed for a short while, and also replenish your

energy supplies," Adrian said.

"It replenishes your energy?" Anessa asked, surprised.

"Yes, but it can't be used often. It isn't as good as what your body produces on its own, so it will drain quicker when you use it. But the most important reason is that using it often or for longer periods of time will cripple you, damage your organs and Sha. That is why there is only this small dose in the suit," Adrian answered.

Anessa looked at him one part disgusted and other impressed. The Shara Daim had been trying to figure out a way to artificially replenish the energy they used to manipulate the Sha for a long time, but never with any success. It was an impressive feat, but the fact that using it risked her crippling herself made her feel uneasy.

"I don't know if I want to risk using it," Anessa said.

"I don't blame you, but it is relatively safe as long as you don't use it often. I used it only once," Adrian said, and glanced at her with a guilty look. "When I fought against you on Tarabat."

Anessa's eyes narrowed. "I knew that I felt something strange then. You were defeated, and then you retaliated with far more strength that you should've had left."

"I had depleted my reserves, yes," Adrian said. "I had no choice but to use the drug."

Anessa looked at him incredulously. "You cheated!"

"Is there really anything that can be considered cheating when you are fighting for your life?" Adrian answered smugly. "Let's get the armor activated," he added before she had a chance to say anything else. "Your armor has a telepathic interface, since you don't have an implant. It's based on the tech that you shared with us, so it should be easy for you to use. But Iris has the manual for yours, so she should be the one to explain."

As soon as he said the name of the AI, a hologram of a small woman on fire appeared over his shoulder. Anessa had accepted the fact that Adrian had an AI in his implant, but seeing her just appear as a hologram was still strange, just like the fact that she saw and heard everything that Adrian did.

"Alright!" Iris exclaimed as she moved to float in front of Anessa. The holographic projector had a short range of around two meters around Adrian where Iris could be projected. "First, the telepathic interface isn't locked right now, but as soon as you make a connection, it will lock to your telepathic signature so that no one else can use it. So make a connection now."

Anessa did as the AI asked, and searched for an interface with her mind. Once she found it, she made a connection. Immediately, her mind was filled with several triggers and words attributed to each one. "I've made the connection," Anessa said.

“Great. Now, you should feel several triggers, one of which is attributed the Shara Daim word for engage. Activate it, please,” Iris said.

“I feel it,” Anessa said, and mentally pressed the trigger. Suddenly, small diamond-shaped scales started cascading over her body from the five solid parts of the armor, quickly covering her entire body. As soon as her face was covered, she noticed that she could see right through the plates now covering her face just like she could through Shur At, only then symbols started appearing over her vision. She looked in front of her to see that Adrian had put on his own new armor and was walking towards her. Above him, overlaid on her vision, was his name.

“I can see your name above you. What is this?” Anessa asked, her voice projected outside of the armor.

“Your suit has a small computer chip similar to the implants that everyone in the Empire uses. It is projecting the same thing on your HUD—or your vision—as every person in the Empire sees. Each implant can read the signature of another and display nonprivate information. We call this augmented reality, and everyone in the Empire always has something overlaid on their vision,” Iris said.

Anessa looked at Adrian in surprise. “You always see these letters and symbols?”

“Most of the time. Not as much here, as they only work with those who have implants and objects that have our computers, and you don’t. I don’t know what you are seeing now, but my HUD is customized to show information important to me, and I can of course always turn it off and clear my vision,” Adrian responded.

Anessa was amazed that after several months of living together there was still a thing about Adrian and the Empire that she wasn’t aware of. She could immediately see the benefits of being able to overlay information over her vision.

Iris flew into her vision and spoke again. “Your HUD is just a standard one. The symbols to the side are a message queue—your suit can receive messages—and a time display. Since you don’t have an implant, you can’t modify your HUD with mental commands, but you can remove the computer chip and access it on any console and then modify it through there.”

“This version of the armor also has a lot more features more suited for combat,” Adrian said. “For example, last time we fought, you damaged my visual sensors, so I lost half of my vision and was forced to remove my helmet during the battle. This helm”—Adrian tapped his head—“is much sturdier, and there is another feature that can help with vision in case the outside nano-cameras are damaged.” Anessa saw several somethings move fast from his back and then fly

over his head. Whatever those were, they were too small to be easily seen by eye, and as she tried to focus her eyes on one of the objects, a portion of her vision split and a small rectangle-shaped window appeared showing the object she was looking at, only much bigger, and Anessa took a step back.

"What is it?" Iris asked.

"I was trying to see what those things were and a portion of my vision changed," Anessa said.

"Ah, yes, the suit is intuitive. It realized that you were trying to see something either far away or very small and it zoomed in on it," Iris said.

Anessa was impressed, and slowly started to see why Adrian thought that his armor was better than her Shur At. "And what are those?" Anessa asked, pointing at the small objects flying over Adrian's head.

"They are small drones. They have cameras and can be used as scouting tools or as an aid in the event that my visual sensors are damaged, as they can stream their feeds directly to my HUD," Adrian answered.

"That is… useful," Anessa said. Suddenly she felt very glad and honored that Adrian had had one of these suits made for her.

"And that isn't all," Adrian said, and Anessa could detect a smile in his voice.

A moment later, a short blade extended from his right forearm, silver in color with a dark blue edge and looking very sharp. "This is a monomolecular blade," Adrian said. "Its edge is one molecule thick, which means that it can basically cut through anything. And in case of the edge getting damaged, all you need to do is apply a charge and the molecules will rearrange and fix the damage."

Anessa looked at the blade in fascination, then glanced at her own forearm. A moment later, she found a trigger with the word 'blade' attributed to it and she pressed it. Her own blade extended from her forearm and she studied it carefully.

"Then there is this," Adrian said as he retracted the blade and showed her his other forearm. A moment later, three slots opened and three round black balls floated out as Anessa felt Adrian use the Sha. "They are enforced ri-steel-carbon polymer. I had them made as an alternative weapon," Adrian said, and she saw him move the balls in a circle around him with them speeding up, and then shoot them off to the wall of the training room and targets placed there. All three balls hit the same target in quick succession with a loud boom, denting the steel targets. "As you can see, they require the Sha to be used, but these armors were intended only for Sha users."

"That is ingenious," Anessa said. Her people had been using Sha

for a long time, and yet they had never devised such a simple way of using their power.

“And one last thing,” Adrian said, and he turned around to face the targets. Suddenly a part of the armor on his back extended over his shoulder and what was clearly a weapon of some kind swiveled forward. A moment later a blue light shone from the muzzle and small bolts of blue white energy started exiting the weapon in rapid succession, hitting the target and blowing small pieces of it. After about ten seconds, the weapon stopped firing, and Anessa looked at the hole it made in the target.

She turned to look at Adrian, who was now turned towards her. “This is the best gift anyone can get.”

Chapter Five

April; Year 58 of the Empire — Unknown system — Erasi super battleship

Hanaru, Weaver of the Erasi, stood on the bridge of his newest warship and watched the holo that showed a large swath of stars. He had been given an important mission by one of the Ancients, O'fa Garash. He had been given a large force, ten Erasi fleets of the newest generations that had just arrived from the core, in addition to a significant taskforce of the newest and most advanced stealth ships. All ship classes looked the same as the previous generations from the outside, but inside they had significant upgrades, the best technologies that Erasi currently possessed. The super battleship that now served as Hanaru's flagship had an increase in firepower of around twenty percent, and an almost thirty percent increase in the shield strength, not to mention many software and structural improvements.

He had a force of twenty-one thousand warships, and another couple hundred support and scout ships. And he needed those numbers if he was to fulfill his mission: to cripple the Empire's ability to aid the Shara Daim. To do that, he needed to first find out more about them, which meant scouting their territory. Which to date had delivered limited success, as the Empire was somehow able to see the Erasi stealth ships. Thankfully, the Ancient had given him a taskforce of the newest generations of stealth ships, ones that used a different kind of tech which his experts believe would not be detectable.

He had already sent them out to scout possible targets, and as their intel from before was limited, they had a lot of work to do. But their task was easier, as the Ancient had also provided a partial map of trans-lanes in the Empire's territory. Hanaru hadn't dared to ask the Ancient where he had procured that map, as he was unaware that any of their spy attempt against the Empire succeeded, but once he got his eyes on the map, his curiosity only increased, because the map was dated to more than ten thousand years before they had even encountered the Empire. Hanaru assumed that it was from the database of the Ancient's people, from a time when before the Erasi was formed.

The map also had a lot of interesting tidbits attached to it. It appeared that the Ancient's people had been looking for a world that could sustain them but also had a good strategic placement. Which meant that they were looking for a hub system, and if he was reading the data correctly, Hanaru was sure that they had considered the homeworld of the Human race as a possibility. There was also a mention of an asset left on the planet to observe the intelligent life

occupying it and report back, but the reports had stopped coming after several hundred years. Hanaru looked but hadn't seen any indication that someone had ever gone back for the asset, and as he checked the timeline, he realized that it had stopped transmitting about the same time that the Erasi were formed, so he assumed that it had simply been forgotten.

But the fact that there was an asset on the world where Humans originated was incredibly interesting, and raised several intriguing questions. Questions that Hanaru would've loved to find the answers for. But he had another mission now, one of far greater importance.

The first thing that he had ordered his stealth ships to attempt to find out was the location of the Empire's principal system, the home of their government. The Empire had never told them, and the Weavers had never managed to find out, and while he doubted that the stealth ships could intercept any important communications, as advanced races usually used hyperspace communications or tight beam ones for any important and classified information, any populated system always had other means of communication that could be listened in on. And while such communications would rarely contain what he could use, they might get lucky.

Hanaru did not yet have a finalized plan on how he was going to execute his orders; for that, he needed more information. But he did have several ideas on how to make sure that the Empire pulled their support of the Shara Daim. The biggest problem he saw was that he didn't actually know how big of a force the Empire had. The Ancient had a large fleet, one that Hanaru doubted could be defeated by even the alliance between the Empire and Shara Daim, but it could slow the conquest of the Shara Daim down. And that was what they were trying to prevent. The Empire's technologies could prove extremely difficult to deal with, especially their intersystem FTL drives, which made their forces extremely hard to ambush and far more versatile. Even only several such fleets could be a nightmare to deal with.

And if the Empire had more such fleets to send to the Shara Daim's aid, this campaign could drag out for far longer than the Erasi could allow it to. As Hanaru understood, the fleets that had arrived with O'fa Garash were taken from the rimward frontier, and he knew that they could not allow the war with the Shara Daim to drag on, or they risked their enemy on the rimward border detecting the weakness. The force that the Ancient took away from the border was small compared to the rest of fleets assigned there, but the war had been in a state of equilibrium for so long that many in the Erasi feared the enemy noticing that small weakness and exploiting it. On the other hand, the enemy hadn't tested the border in well over three decades, and many had turned to the thinking that they had finally

decided that it wasn't worth it for them to expand in the Erasi's direction, and so they had allowed the force to be moved to the front against the Shara Daim. Hanaru understood why that was. The Shara Daim were a threat that would've eventually have attacked the Erasi, and allowing them to grow stronger and to make the first move was foolish.

Hanaru had several plans on how to make sure that the Empire was too busy to aid their new allies. One had been to split up his forces and hit several systems at once, forcing the Empire to chase after his forces. Although, as the information acquired by the new stealth ships came in, that plan was more and more unlikely. Firstly because for some reason the population centers of the Empire were spread out, with a lot of systems in between left empty. Their territory wasn't nearly as densely populated as that of either the Erasi or the Shara Daim. And splitting up the fleet would be far less effective; with the speed of the Empire ships and the distances between their populated systems, his forces wouldn't have been able to deal nearly as much damage as they would've been able against a more densely populated empire. And the Empire ships would've intercepted his ships before they even reached secondary targets, meaning at best they would've been able to hit only the primary targets. Then there was the second problem: every populated system was extremely well defended, far more than similarly sized systems in the Erasi, which meant that he would need to make the forces larger in order for them to succeed, and that would reduce the number of systems he could hit at the same time.

So he was starting to lean towards the other plan: attack a major system, one with high population and industry, preferably one that had most of their shipyards. After such a hit, he could scatter his fleets and use them as small insurgent-type forces, attacking targets of opportunities and forcing the Empire to deploy a large number of their ships for the purpose of hunting down his forces.

Hanaru mused about his plans, but ultimately decided that he need more information before deciding on a plan. In any case, he still had some time before the deadline that the Ancient gave him. Better that he waited and made sure that his attack would fulfill his mission than to attack early and fail.

Chapter Six

Shara Radum system

Adrian sat on the podium of a large cave with his legs crossed, or rather his avatar did. The ceiling of the cave was far above him, and several small tunnels led away from the central chamber he was in. The cave had no natural light source, but it was illuminated anyway; the large cave complex was, after all, inside his mind. It was a part of his mind, a library of sorts for all his memories. Each tunnel led to different places, where different parts of his memories were stored. Moments from his childhood that he had long forgotten, every word of books he had read long ago, details of encounters and conversations that had occurred decades ago. All those memories were there for him to access and refresh. The cave complex was only a 'visual' construct, something to help him organize his thoughts and defend them from outside influence. Adrian's construct was a cave system buried deep inside of a mountain, the rocks of the mountain representing his defenses, while the vastness of the caves represented his power.

Adrian felt a presence at the edge of his telepathic shields, and he lowered his defense. A moment later, Lurker of the Depths, or rather his avatar, stood before Adrian dressed in the Sowir version of the Empire's skinsuits. Adrian's teacher was the one who had taught Adrian how to create this construct in order to better store and protect his memories. Making a mind construct was the greatest achievement a telepath could achieve, and only the most powerful Sowir were capable of it. It was the ultimate defense against other telepaths, a place where a telepath was the strongest. It was a place where telepaths stored their most important memories and the core of who they were, buried deep within, where an invader would have great difficulty reaching.

It had taken Adrian decades to build his construct, but as his teacher had told him, it usually took far longer for others. But Adrian had an advantage—his mindspace. While similar, the two abilities were not the same thing. Adrian's mindspace was unique; it allowed him to speed up his mind processing power far above what he was able to do while 'awake,' and that allowed him to alter his perception of time. He was still not able to make the time dilatation constant, but on average he could spend weeks in his mindspace while only an hour passed in real-time. His absolute control of his body had not only allowed him to improve his fighting skills far above anyone else, but had also given him time to study, to develop new techniques, to reflect on his actions and to plan for the future. Inside his mindspace, he had already been able to make smaller constructs, people made up

from his memories, that he could train against or use as inspiration or a way to debate his own decisions and 'converse' with his subconscious mind.

Adrian's avatar stood and faced Lurker of the Depths. **"Teacher,"** he sent. He didn't really speak with telepathy. Inside this construct, they were so connected that they could understand each other even if Adrian spoke 'vocally,' but the Sowir had no vocal ability, so it seemed respectful that he used 'telepathy.'

"It's bigger than it was last time," Lurker of the Depths commented, and Adrian felt/saw several distinct emotions and images flash before him. Now that they were inside Adrian's construct, their minds were extremely close, and some of the Sowir way of communicating slipped through. Adrian felt awe, envy, and, underneath those emotions, a strong line of pride. It made Adrian feel good to know that his teacher was proud of his achievements, even though he was envious of what he had accomplished. Sowir didn't really communicate with words, more like thoughts that were impressions of physical sensations and emotions coupled with images. But communicating through telepathy was different; each side interpreted the other's means of communication as something that they understood.

"I've had time to work on it," Adrian answered. His construct was modeled on that of his teacher. The Sowir had evolved as an aquatic species, living beneath the ocean floor in submerged cave like cities. They had eventually evolved the ability to survive on the ground, but the ocean was their true home. Lurker of the Depths' construct was a cave similar to Adrian's, only his was submerged in water.

"It is impressive work," Lurker of the Depths sent, and an image of a vast underwater cavern filled Adrian's mind—a memory from his teacher. Lurker of the Depths looked around at the smooth gray rock walls with great interest. Most of the room was empty; this was his central chamber where he was strongest inside his mind. The rest of the rooms that were at the ends of the many tunnels had furniture. Most had a holotable and shelves with datachips—a visual representation of his memories. With a thought, he could close every tunnel and keep his memories safe. But the main chamber was empty; it had nothing that an invading telepath could use against him.

"Although, I do see a couple of weaknesses," Lurker of the Depths added while pointing to the side.

Adrian frowned and looked in the direction that he was pointing. To him, the walls looked like smooth, strong rock—and then he noticed a minuscule defect in his defenses. He focused and reinforced the 'walls.'

Then, Adrian felt amusement from his teacher. **"Don't worry. These defenses are far above what anyone of your age could've accomplished. Above what even the more powerful Sowir could accomplish. Only the most powerful telepaths would've even noticed those weaknesses, and few of them would be powerful enough to take advantage of them."**

"You noticed," Adrian said gloomily.

"I did, but I am far older than you, Adrian. I had time to perfect my skills."

Adrian grunted unhappily. He knew that he was already extremely powerful, stronger than any other telepath he had encountered, even every Sowir other than perhaps Lurker of the Depths. Although Adrian was stronger in terms of raw power, his teacher was far better in skill.

"Your defenses are good, Adrian; there is nothing else that I can teach you," Lurker of the Depths sent.

"Thank you, Teacher."

"No, I am no longer your teacher," Lurker of the Depths sent, along with images of them standing side by side as equals.

Adrian smiled. **"Thank you, Tea—Lurker of the Depths."**

"Now, tell me how you have been doing? I can feel that you are not balanced; there are things bothering you."

Adrian sighed. He stood from the center of the room and moved them out of his construct. Suddenly they were back in the 'real' world, sitting on the floor of the small room on their new base designed for telepathy training. **"Anessa is moving to the front. She believes that her people need to see her lead from the front, that that would reaffirm her rule."**

"And what do you think?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

"I agree with her to a point. That action will show her people that she is prepared to fight for them, that even with all the changes she has been forcing, she is still a warrior. But I cannot have our fleets aid her beyond simple scouting. I know that the Erasi have no desire to deal with us fairly, but many deal with them without being their members. If we join in the Shara Daim attack while they are attempting to reach a diplomatic solution with us, we will be perceived as untrustworthy," Adrian sent, allowing some of his troubled emotions to pass through. **"That would jeopardize all of our future dealings with the races in this sector, perhaps even beyond if the word spreads. All of our conflicts until now have been because we had no choice, but we've always tried to speak with our opponents first. We can't refuse now when one of them seemingly wants to speak with us. If the Empire is going to achieve its goals, we need to be known to be**

trustworthy, ready to deal fairly with all."

"I understand the Emperor's thoughts in this, but both of you must know that that will be used as a weakness by others. The Erasi are just the first that are going to take advantage of your honor," Lurker of the Depths sent.

"Of course we know," Adrian responded. **"It is the price we need to pay in order to achieve our goals."**

"Do you really believe that we can make a difference against the numbers the Erasi possess?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

"We can," Adrian said confidently. **"Our ships are better; our skim drives give us an enormous advantage, and we do have a few things that can level the playing field if used effectively. And another six fleets should arrive from the Empire by the end of the month."**

"Skim missiles are a great advantage, I agree; we just don't have enough of them. As we don't have enough fleets."

"Every month that passes gives us more time to build ships. We have been completely focused on building warships for the past three years. Our shipbuilding efforts have just hit their stride. Counting the fleets that are here, the Empire has sixteen fleets, and we produce a new one every three months. The more time the Erasi give us, the better."

"They will still have the advantage in numbers, Adrian. I know that you are used to fighting at a disadvantage, but for all we know, those reinforcements could be just a small token of their true numbers," Lurker of the Depths sent. **"I know you, Adrian, I understand you. I know what you are planning, and I don't think that it will work here. The Erasi cannot afford to be seen as weak, their entire system depends on their ability to enforce their contracts, that their people know that the Erasi are the strongest and can fight off any outsider. In a way, they are far more like the Shara Daim than they are like us; they take care of any potential threat to their empire before it can have a chance to threaten them. The Shara Daim did it by force, the Erasi use guile, tricks, and manipulations, and as we can see now, when those fail, they have enough force to deal with anything. They will not come at us head on; they will try to get any advantage that they can."**

"You are right, but even for them, there must be a point where it will be too costly for them to continue fighting us," Adrian sent.

"You cannot apply your logic and honor to them, Adrian. If you hadn't showed us our error, my people would've never have stopped fighting you, no matter the cost," Lurker of the Depths

sent.

"Then all I need to do is show them that they are wrong and that we can coexist in peace."

"I hope that you manage it."

"I hope so too," Adrian said, as the two left the training room.

They walked together through the newly constructed base on the moon of the seventh planet in the Shara Radum system. The base construction had been quick and easy; the Empire had long ago started using modules for all of its constructions, both military and civilian. They would build 'boxes' that had different purposes, from those that had living quarters to those that housed generators or training rooms. The only thing that was required was for them to be placed on the ground and connected to each other in whatever order they needed them to be. There were several different shapes and sizes, from smaller boxes that were cubes of 10 meters across, to far larger cuboids that could be up to 200 meters long. The modules could be attached to each other on any side, and were quick and easy to assemble. Anessa had already told him that she was impressed with the speed at which they had assembled the base.

"When are we leaving?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

"In a week. I tried to convince Anessa to wait until the rest of our fleets arrive, but she is stubborn. She doesn't want to wait any longer; she is readying her Legions to retake their hub systems before the Erasi reinforcements can arrive," Adrian answered.

"How will the Shara Daim react once they see my people? Or do you still plan on keeping most of us on our ships at all times?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

Adrian sighed. **"You will be by my side most of the time. If anyone has a problem with that, they will deal with me."**

"And you believe that your presence is enough to stop any hostility?" Lurker of the Depths asked.

Adrian snorted out loud. **"Nope, the Shara Daim are stubborn and their Dai Sha set in their ways. I spoke with Anessa and she agrees that they need to be brought down a bit; they need to realize that being Shara Daim doesn't automatically make them superior to any other race,"** Adrian sent, and turned to look at Lurker of the Depths. **"If anyone tries to do something, just drop them to the floor."**

"If I have no choice," Lurker of the Depths sent with a small undercurrent of amusement beneath his words.

Adrian smiled. He couldn't wait to see a few of the Dai Sha try to intimidate his former teacher.

Chapter Seven

June; Year 58 of the Empire — Sanctuary

Tomas sat in his office and reviewed the latest report from Tarabat and Shara Radum, forwarded from Sol. Sentinel Aileen was having trouble with getting the Erasi to agree to anything, and given that they had a massive fleet assembled, they probably didn't even want peace. Tomas grimaced as he remembered the Erasi reinforcements; he was doubtful that any aid from the Empire could actually help the Shara Daim against those numbers, but Adrian believed otherwise. And Tomas trusted Adrian's judgment.

But the fact that the Erasi were capable of fielding such numbers made him anxious. With the last six fleets that he had sent to Adrian, the Empire was left with only four fleets to defend itself. Of course, there were the system guards, which consisted of drones and old class warships, but against a modern fleet they would have trouble, except for Warpath's guard fleet, which was based on their Vanguard ships. And there was also the fact that his four fleets were spread apart across the Empire's territory. One fleet was always at Sanctuary, but the other three patrolled the other five sectors of the Empire. And while the Empire's shipyards were extremely advanced and could produce new fleets incredibly quickly, it was still not enough. An empire like the Erasi had far more resources and manpower.

Tomas had been trying to find another way for them to end the Erasi conflict other than with force; he had even offered to give them the Empire's skim tech, and still they didn't agree. They had played around the offer, showing interest but not really agreeing to anything. He knew now that they were stalling, but he had still believed that the skim technology was a good enough offer for them to give up from war. And yet they were still set on that path; all their public actions gave an impression that they were dealing in good faith, but he could see that they would not abort their plans.

Tomas rubbed his eyes and sighed, raising his head to look at the ceiling. He needed to give Adrian the tools to help the Shara Daim and end the conflict with the Erasi, but the Empire simply didn't have an industry capable of matching their opponent. He knew that they could close the gap, given time. They had superior tech, and in a decade or maybe two, the Empire could match the Erasi. The problem was that they didn't have time. His thoughts strayed to project Sovereign. He was certain that if those four ships were ready, they would have a much easier time against the Erasi, not simply because of their firepower, but also because they could travel between Nelus, Sol, and Shara Radum almost instantly. They could transport ships, personnel,

defense platforms, or simply materials incredibly fast. But Isani had convinced him that that was impossible, that the project was too far away from completion.

For a moment, Tomas had even toyed with the idea of sending the Enduring, the ship left by Axull Darr. But he knew that that would be a bad idea; the consequences would be far larger. That ship could probably deal with the Erasi fleets, but it was still only one ship, that could be only in one place at a time, and Erasi had who knew how many more ships available. Not to mention what showing that ship would mean both for the Empire and all who learned of it. He'd decided against it, trusting that his people would find a way.

They needed this, to struggle, to fight. They couldn't rely on tech that they didn't understand, hadn't mastered. To do that was to go down the path that would ultimately lead to them growing complacent and weak. And Tomas had vowed long ago that his people would never again be weak.

* * *

"If the enemy is so powerful, how are their machine armies keeping them contained?" Seo-yun asked the floating shape in the middle of the room. The hologram of Axull Darr floated and looked in her eyes with no expression on his face. Before his death, Axull Darr, the ultimate ancestor of humans, Nel, and Shara Daim, had made an image of his mind, a copy of his memories and everything else that made him a person, and put it in three spheres that contained all the knowledge of the People, the first intelligent race in the galaxy. Two of the spheres had been lost, and the third was on a pedestal in front of Seo-yun.

"Attrition," the 'shadow' of Axull Darr responded.

"What do you mean by that? You said that they were more advanced than you. Your machine armies couldn't be advanced enough to battle them," Seo-yun pressed. She was inquisitive by nature, a scientist that had learned many fields and would learn many more now that she would never age. She just couldn't let it be; she needed to know.

"Machines are built far faster and easier; it takes a while for the enemy to renew their numbers. Each of their soldiers and ships must be grown using life and biomass. They are better than the machines, but they also take a long time to make. The machine army and the AIs guiding it simply throw ships and machine soldiers at them as fast as they make them. And the People had extremely fast building capabilities," Axull Darr responded.

“I still don’t understand how they are keeping them contained so much. That is an enormous area of space that they need to keep under their control in order to keep them contained. Ten thousand lightyears in every direction. If they are keeping them surrounded, that is hundreds of thousands of square lightyears.”

“The enemy doesn’t expand like how you think. They move into an area a couple hundred systems large and devour it, then they move to a new cluster, abandoning the first. Their territory is moving constantly. The area that they are protecting is smaller than what you are imagining, and it is a perfect sphere, with most of the fighting happening on the edges of that sphere. We do not know what is happening deeper in their territory, but the fact that the enemy has advanced means that the containment is a temporary measure,” Axull Darr said.

“How have the machines not defeated them? Built a force strong enough to overwhelm them?” Seo-yun asked.

“The enemy is not grabbing new territory with its full strength. They are moving slowly, at their own pace. Amassing a large force has been tried before, but each time Ullax tried to build more forces away from the front, the enemy would send more ships threatening to overwhelm the border, forcing them to pull back the resources to the front.”

“Ullax? That’s an anagram of your name,” Seo-yun said curious.

“Yes, our names are anagrams of each other. Ullax is my twin sister; she came up with the idea for the containment.”

“Oh. Is she still alive?” Seo-yun asked.

“Possibly, but I don’t know. Our—or rather, Axull’s and her parting was not on best terms. As far as my memories go, they did not speak after they parted.”

“What could have been so bad that they didn’t speak afterwards?”

Axull Darr was silent for a time before answering. “Axull had doubts about the motives for her decision.”

“Motives?”

“I will not speak more on this.”

Seo-yun was tempted to push, but she managed to control the urge. Instead, she steered the conversation back at the previous topic. “You said that the enemy is not fighting at full strength?”

“No, they only showed glimpses of it when Ullax and the others tried to pull resources from the containment to build up forces. It was as if they could feel that Ullax and the others wanted to try something, so they pushed harder, forcing them to recall the resources they tried to use.”

“But why keep themselves back if their purpose is to devour life?”

“We do not know what their purpose is,” Axull Darr said.

“What? Didn’t you say that they only want to devour life?”

“Yes, they need life to fuel themselves, to grow faster, and any life that happened in their path was destroyed. But we do not know what their real purpose is. Their actions suggest that there is something else, but they have always taken their time, so it has been assumed that they, like the People, are immortal, and that they have time and are in no rush. No incursion into the center of their territory has ever succeeded. We know very little of their actual motives, and the three always spoke cryptically.”

“You spoke with them?” Seo-yun asked, surprised.

“Of course, they were our people. We tried to talk to them, to get them to stop the abominations that they had created. But instead all we got were the offers of a gift of Enlightenment.”

“Enlightenment?”

“They call themselves the Enlightened now. They had taken new names, each a variation on the old language of the People and the word for Enlightened in different dialects—Anis—so they became Aranis, Loranis, and Doranis. The three had offered to make us like them, telling us that we would understand once we were changed,” Axull Darr said sadly. “We of course refused their offer. Whatever had happened to them had clearly driven them insane.”

Seo-yun didn’t respond. Perhaps it was too soon for them to deal with something that was clearly far above them. Each of Axull Darr’s answers only gave rise to new questions.

“I can see now why you didn’t want to tell us too much,” Seo-yun said. “There are so many unanswered questions, and there is nothing that we can do to find the answers.”

“No, there isn’t. In time, I hope that you will be able to answer them.”

Chapter Eight

Ten days later; July — Tarabat

"The Shara Daim have been very clear. Unless you are prepared to meet with their leadership and deal with them in person, and soon, they will retake their systems, and they will not stop at the previous border. They cannot allow you to keep their worlds and people any longer," Aileen said.

"We understand, of course. But these kind of talks are delicate, and our leadership is in the core," a Gatrey, Katunaru, said.

"Then you will have war again, and my people will be joining the side of the Shara Daim," Aileen stated.

"There is no reason for you to involve yourselves in this conflict; there is no cause for it between us." Katunaru said.

"You started the war with the Shara Daim with no provocation; that tells us a great deal about you. And you have attacked three of the Empire's ships and destroyed one, killing thousands," Aileen said coldly.

"An isolated incident, instigated by a rogue commander. Hanaru will be found and will answer for his actions," Katunaru said dismissively, as the Erasi negotiators always did. The sad part was that Aileen knew that it wasn't just a rehearsed line; he truly believed that the attack and the deaths of the Empire's citizens were nothing more than a small incident. The aides sitting around Katunaru seemed to share his opinion. And she knew that they would never find Hanaru. Jurr had not been able to find any more information on the Gatrey; he had probably already disappeared to who knew where.

"And the Shara Daim have been threatening our borders for a long time," Katunaru continued. "You only need to look at their history to understand why we chose to attack preemptively. They have always looked at other races with distaste. Until you came along, they have never dealt with another race fairly. Our government is not convinced that they are prepared to deal with us in good faith."

"My Emperor guarantees it. You have this one chance to make peace with the Shara Daim; if you do not take it, you will be at war with both them and the Empire," Aileen said, and stood up. "This is your last chance. Unless I get a favorable response by the end of the day, the Empire will close its embassy on Tarabat, and with it all diplomatic relations between us." She nodded once to Katunaru and his aides and then left the room.

It took her and the adept guard less than half an hour to get to the compound, and Aileen headed straight for the communications room. The compound was almost empty. Most personnel had been

moved to Aileen's ship, Jewel, ever since she had received word from Adrian. The only ones remaining at the compound were Aileen, Adept Garani, Communications Adjunct Khan, and Compound Leader Björn. She knew that it was unlikely that the Erasi would agree to anything, and she wanted to be prepared to leave fast. Once inside the communications room, Adjunct Khan greeted Aileen.

"Get me a link with the relay. I need to send a message to Sol," Aileen said. The Empire had already put a relay net between Sol and Tarabat, and another one between Sol and Shara Radum should be going online in a few days. So while she needed to send a message to Adrian, it would actually get there faster if it was relayed through Sol, as the Shara Daim and Erasi didn't have any relays between them, and even if they had, Aileen wouldn't have used their networks to send information.

"That's strange…" Adjunct commented.

"What's strange?"

"I can't get a signal out. Give me a sec," Adjunct Khan said, and started working on his station. Holowindows flew around, moved by both his hands and his imp. Aileen waited impatiently for him to elaborate, but the man knew how to do his job and didn't need her interrupting.

"Ah, here it is. The Erasi put out an alert a few minutes ago; a hyperstorm appears to have formed over Tarabat's hyperspace area. Communications using hyperspace will be impossible for some time," Khan said.

"A hyperstorm? Is that a real thing?" Aileen asked suspiciously.

Khan turned to look at her. "Oh yes, we know about them, but they should be very rare, and the Empire still hasn't encountered one. It's unlikely for them to form over a system, so we still haven't caught one that we can study more in-depth. Records we have are from much… simpler instruments."

"How unlikely are they?" Aileen asked.

"Very. They are large enough to cover an entire system, for sure, but our normal-space and hyperspace are not perfectly aligned. For the storm to perfectly cover an entire system is improbable."

"How long ago did the alert go out?" Aileen asked.

"Twenty-two minutes ago," Khan answered.

"That's six minutes after I left the meeting," Aileen said slowly.

"Coincidence?" Adept Garani asked from behind her.

"Maybe," Aileen said, thinking hard. It could be a coincidence, but her instincts told her otherwise. And she had survived for a long time by following her instincts. "The Sowir once blocked our communications through hyperspace. Does this look like that?"

Khan frowned and turned to his station, after a few swipes a

series of graphs and things that Aileen couldn't even begin to understand appeared. "It's… it's similar, for sure, but I don't know what a hyperspace storm looks like. I have no point of reference."

Aileen turned to the adept. "Get Björn, and activate protocol G-39," Aileen ordered. The adept turned immediately and left running.

"Normal-space communications still work?" she asked Khan, who nodded.

"Get me the Jewel."

A few seconds later, a hologram of Jewel's Ship Master appeared.

"Sentinel?" Ship Master Vota asked from her command chair.

"Vota, I need you to get the ship ready for departure from the system, and for you to get the ship to high alert. We might not be leaving quietly," Aileen ordered.

The Ship Master merely nodded and started executing her orders. "We'll be ready to depart in ten." With that, she closed the connection.

"Contact the shuttle crew at the port, let them know to be ready. Then go to the armory, get suited up, and meet me in the main room."

Aileen turned and went straight for the armory, picking up her rifle and then going to the main room where she found Björn already dressed up in light armor. Adept Garani sat at the table and was checking his weapons.

"You sure that they are planning something?" Björn asked.

"No, but I'd rather err on the side of caution," Aileen answered as she triggered the command for her Sentinel armor to go into combat mode. A few moments later, Khan, dressed in the same armor as Björn, joined them.

"Did you set everything up?" Aileen asked.

"Yes, I already put in the command," Björn answered. That meant that all the Empire's computers would delete their data, just as nanites were released to dismantle every piece of technology. The dismantling took a few minutes, so the data scrub was an added precaution.

"Alright. I might be wrong about all this, but I doubt that Erasi will change their minds. If I'm wrong, we'll just wait out the remainder of the day on board the Jewel," Aileen said.

"And if you are right?" Björn asked.

"Then they don't want us to leave, or to contact our people. They might not know that we are aware of their reinforcements, so they need to keep us stalled until they are ready to attack." Aileen looked around the room. "Let's go, we're using the back door," she said, and started towards the room in the back of the compound. The Tarabat officials had offered the Empire a prime real estate as their embassy, but Adrian had refused and had purchased this compound. Under Erasi laws, that was acceptable, and the compound that he'd found

had everything that they needed. It had once been a place of business for a criminal element, which was exactly why it suited them. It was in fact three small buildings smashed together. It had enough room for everything a diplomatic team would need, and it had been planned that trading elements from the Empire could set their business there as well for protection. Sadly, they hadn't reached that point.

But one of the things that wasn't on any scans of the buildings was the 'back door.' It had been added by the previous owners as a means of escape, and it would serve Aileen and her people now. She reached one of the back rooms and approached a wall. She put her hand on a seemingly ordinary piece of the wall, and a moment later a door slid open. She and her people entered and went down into the tunnel, which eventually led them to a small alley behind a building across the street from the Empire's compound.

Aileen took the lead and they started towards the port, which was about twenty minutes away on foot. They stepped into the street and walked in the open. They didn't really stand out that much; in their armor, the only thing that others would see was a biped, like the majority of other races. And they were among the throng of other aliens all moving about their business. Aileen debated calling for a grav-car but decided against it. She didn't know if the Erasi were monitoring those services or not, and didn't want to tip her hand. When they were about halfway to the port, three Erasi military shuttles flew over their heads going in the direction of the Empire's compound.

"Pick up the pace," Aileen said over their suit comms.

They started walking faster toward the port, but then Aileen noticed several transports moving towards the port.

"Crap," she said, and opened a channel to the shuttle crew. "The Erasi are moving on you. Lift off and come pick us up."

"We'll be at your location in three minutes," the shuttle pilot responded.

Aileen motioned for her group to take positions in a side alley and wait. The port might have defensive guns, but Aileen doubted that they would try to shoot the shuttle down; there was too much traffic and too large of chance of debris hitting the streets, a drawback of having a port in the middle of a city. A few minutes later, she saw the shuttle approach towards them on her HUD, and she commed and told the pilot to land in the street. Hopefully the people on the street would move.

Just as the shuttle was preparing to land, she saw it jerk upwards as three streaks of light entered her view. The first one missed, but the last two struck the shuttle's shields and exploded, making a part of the shields visible and engulfing the shuttle in flames. For a moment,

Aileen thought that the shields had failed, but after the explosions cleared, she saw that it was still there.

She quickly opened a channel. “Get to the Jewel right now,” Aileen ordered.

“I doubt that we can get to atmosphere, Sentinel,” the pilot said.

“Skim to the Jewel, don’t let them catch you,” Aileen ordered. She couldn’t believe that they had attacked the shuttle over the city, and she knew that it couldn’t stay there for even a second more. The Erasi seemed unconcerned with the damage they could inflict upon the city if they destroyed the shuttle.

“But that would… Yes, Sentinel,” the pilot responded, and closed the comms. He understood what skimming from the atmosphere would do to this part of the city. The pulse that occurred when a ship entered skim was much greater inside the atmosphere; the shuttle’s drives would blow all running electronics through a large radius around it. But Aileen saw no choice. Either the Erasi destroyed her shuttle, killing her people and who knew how many others on the ground, or they skimmed from the atmosphere. Which she knew would cause deaths as well; inside the range that the pulse would cover, shuttles and grav-cars would lose controls. But Aileen laid the blame for any death at the Erasi’s feet. They hadn’t even warned her shuttle to land, they’d just opened fire. Not that her people would’ve obeyed, but still. It told her that they were prepared to do anything to stop them from leaving or contacting her people.

Aileen then opened a comm to the Jewel. “Ship Master, as soon as you pick up the shuttle crew, you are to leave the system, skim away immediately, I don’t care about the damage that you could do; if you need to fight your way out, then do so. Get to Sol and let our people know. Hopefully you will be able to come get us later with more ships,” she ordered, just as the shuttle oriented towards the orbit while it evaded another wave of missiles.

Aileen turned to her group. “Shut down all your suit electronics, set your suits to shield modes,” she ordered over the comms, and then did the same. Her implant was shielded extremely well inside her brain, but the suits would suffer if they were hit with the pulse. Even though they did have defenses against EMPs, the skim pulse this close was something more powerful than what those defenses could handle.

The shuttle skimmed. In a blink of an eye, it shimmered and then disappeared, leaving behind a shockwave that spread all over the city. In a moment the lights on the streets died, grav-cars lost their controls and crashed into each other. Chaos was all around her. Aileen turned to her group as she rebooted her suit’s systems.

“Let’s go,” Aileen said, and together they disappeared into the masses.

* * *

Ship Master Vota sat on board the Jewel, her crew working furiously to get them away from the planet.

"The shuttle is on board, Ship Master."

"Good," Vota said. "Lucas, did you find it?"

"No, Ship Master. They trapped us," her Navigation Handler reported grimly.

Vota shook her head. The Erasi must've set this up days ago. Her ship was unable to skim away from the planet because the Erasi had stealthily moved traffic to block their path. The Jewel was surrounded by stations on the sides, and traffic was constantly moving ahead of them in unpredictable ways, making it impossible for them to skim with no risk of hitting something. There was a reason why the Empire's ships always moved away from everything and skimmed only when they had a clear line of sight. The ship in skim could survive small objects in its paths—dust or small pebbles were simply evaporated by the forward field—but anything more massive than a shuttle and the result was much different. The energy released related to the amount of mass inside the skim field, and Jewel was large enough that any collision would release energy sufficient to blow a small station apart. Although the energy released was nowhere near the size it should be for an object traveling at speeds faster than the speed of light. The skim field bent the space and time around the object, so technically they were not moving at FTL. When a field impacted an object large enough to disrupt it, the field broke, tearing apart the object inside of it and throwing it back into normal space.

"Keep looking," Vota ordered, then turned to her Communications Handler. "Anything?"

"They are still not responding, Ship Master."

Vota grimaced. There were three Erasi battleships on their way, and they would enter firing range in less than a minute. The station had surprisingly not yet fired on them, but Vota assumed that they didn't want to provoke her ship. The stations were not solely military in nature; there were traders from many different races on them, both from the Erasi and independent. They must have believed that she wouldn't fire on them unless fired upon. And they were right. The Empire was ready to make hard choices when forced to, but firing upon a station filled with innocents with no provocation from them was another thing. The battleships, on the other hand, were another story entirely—they were military ships.

"The enemy battleships have fired missiles, Ship Master!"

Vota looked over her c-board. There was no way out. They could risk and try to skim, but she wasn't yet ready to order that.

“Bring the point defense net online. Lock proton turrets three through eight on the closest battleship—designate B-1, four seconds cycle,” Vota ordered. Her ship’s proton beams were already in range. “Arm missiles, swarm-type loadout. Navigation, put us on a course out of high orbit.”

The crew followed her orders immediately. Her c-board updated as her people targeted the Erasi battleship, and she designated the two other battleships as B-2 and B-3. She couldn’t use her ship’s kinetic weapons; she couldn’t risk hitting some of the civilian stations or ships, and most of their other weapons were close range, which meant that they were forced to use only proton beams and missiles.

“Proton beams and missiles locked, Ship Master.”

“Fire missiles.”

Vota watched as her ship fired four standard loads of missiles, while the enemy missiles sped towards her ship from two different directions. There were a little more than a thousand enemy missiles coming for her ship, with about half that following behind the first wave. Each of her ship’s loads contained one hundred missiles, for the total of four hundred Swarm MK IX missiles, the newest in the Swarm series. She had a load of ion missiles as well, designed to take down shields, but they were very situational. They simply stood out too much, and she had too few of them for this instance. The Erasi would take them down before she could utilize them. Her Swarm missiles, on the other hand, were faster than that of the Erasi, and soon they crossed two thirds of the distance.

Suddenly the tracks on her c-board increased in number as the first load of the Swarm missiles entered their second phase and each missile split into six smaller ones. Instead of one hundred missiles, the enemy battleship was faced with six times that number. Vota knew what that could do to a defensive system. Their computers would be confused for a moment, and then they would try to acquire targets that were no longer there, and then finally they would start targeting the new missiles.

And that was exactly what happened. The Erasi defensive net started firing on the new missiles, but it was too late; dozens of missiles from the first wave passed through to impact the shields. Each missile had less power than what the Empire’s other types had, but these missiles were designed to overwhelm enemy point defense and shields.

“Watch their shields. As soon as you see an opening, open fire with proton beams,” she ordered just as the enemy missiles reached the range of her ship’s point defense.

The Jewel’s point defense opened fire and lasers started taking down missiles, but there were too many of them coming from three

different directions. Soon the missiles started hitting the Jewel's shields.

Vota glanced at her c-board and watched as the second wave of her missiles struck at the enemy battleship, then the third and the fourth. The consecutive hits paid off and Vota saw the battleship's forward shields fail, several missiles passing through to impact the hull. In the next instant, her Weapons Handler opened fire. Proton beams struck the enemy ship, gouging holes into the Erasi battleship that was rotating its saucer shape to bring to bear an area where they still had shields.

"Ship Master, I have a possible course," the Navigation Handler said. "It's not a clear path, but it is the best I can do."

Vota glanced at the course and saw that this course had a sixty percent chance of successful skim, but that it would require them to get through the Erasi battleship.

"Change course, full power towards that battleship," Vota ordered. "Charge ion turrets and k-turrets three and four."

The Jewel had already left the planet's high orbit, and the ship veered off towards the Erasi battleship. The other two battleships were coming in from behind her now, and Erasi drives were better. They would overtake them eventually.

"Incoming fire from B-1!" the Sensor Handler reported.

Vota saw that they were now in the range of the Erasi battleships' particle weapons. Her shields were still taking a beating from the enemy missiles as their second wave reached them. The shields had dropped to 53% and were dropping even faster now that the enemy battleships' particle weapons were in range.

Vota did the math in her head. She knew that the shields wouldn't survive until she entered point-blank range of the Erasi battleship, and she needed to get past it.

"Power down all weapons. Switch to shimmering field and then depower the shields," Vota ordered. "Bring the weapons back online as soon as you switch."

Her crew immediately went to work. The Sentinel ships had both defensive kits, the shields and the shimmering field, but they could only power one of them and the weapons, or power both without weapons. Vota was tempted to try focus all power on defenses and forsake her weapons, but she knew that unless she took down that battleship, it would keep pouring fire into her ship and overwhelm both of the Jewel's defenses before they could attempt to skim. The shimmering field technology was one that the Empire stole from the Ra'a'zani. It wasn't as effective as the shields at stopping incoming fire, but it would dissipate any impact, lessening the force of the attack. Vota only hoped that that would be enough for them to survive

long enough to get away.

The Jewel's weapons fire died off as the crew of the ship worked to switch power from the weapons to the shimmering field, and Vota wondered what the Erasi battleships thought about her ship's silence.

As the Erasi battleship grew close, the shields on the Jewel dropped below 20%. Just as Vota was about to ask the status of the power switch, the shields went down, and she saw her crew working to bring the weapons back online. Suddenly the fire from the Erasi battleships stuck far closer to the Jewel's hull, but the shimmering field did its job and dissipated the enemy fire.

A sudden lull in the battle appeared as Vota assumed the Erasi were trying to figure out what had happened. And that lull gave her people enough time to bring her weapons back online.

"We'll be in point-blank range in twenty seconds for ten seconds as we pass the battleship, Ship Master," her Sensor Handler said.

Vota nodded. The Erasi battleship had been slowing down, presumably preparing to change course and follow her ship as she went past theirs.

She watched on her c-board as fire kept pouring into her ship. Damage reports started popping up as the fire accumulated and the Jewel started venting atmosphere. Vora had nothing else to do until they entered the point-blank range of her ion turrets. Point defense kept taking down enemy missiles that now came in smaller waves, but every now and then a few would get through and hit the shimmering field or the hull where it had failed. Her proton beams kept firing on the Erasi battleship in front of them, blasting holes in the hull where their shields failed or hitting the shields where they didn't.

Then they entered the optimal range of her ion turrets, and she raised her head from her c-board to look at her crew.

"Fire ion turrets," Vota ordered, and immediately six ion beams designed to punch through energy shields struck and punched through their shields. The entire side of the Erasi battleship suddenly found itself without shields.

"Fire k-turrets." Just as the two ships were passing one another at a distance of no more than eight thousand kilometers, or about 26 light-milliseconds, the Jewel's two k-turrets fired.

Massive kinetic shells left the Jewel as streaks of light. Traveling at one third the speed of light, the two shells struck the unprotected Erasi battleship. The result was spectacular; the ship tore apart as it broke into three pieces, with explosions throwing each of those pieces flying in different directions.

"How long until we can skim?" Vota asked.

"Twenty seconds, Ship Master," the Navigation Handler said as he oriented the ship towards the course that would hopefully lead them

through the Erasi ‘blockade.’ The two remaining battleships kept firing and speeding towards the Jewel, targeting their drives. By now, the Jewel was littered with gashes and scorch marks on its hull, and its drives had been reduced to almost half of their max output.

“We can skim on your command, Ship Master. I can’t guarantee that we will make it, but it’s the best path I could find.”

Vota closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Skim,” she ordered.

* * *

The Empire Sentinel ship Jewel powered up its skim drive, and two powerful fields sprang into existence, one in front of the ship and one behind it. A moment later, space bent around it and the ship entered the skim, traveling faster than the speed of light.

Several moments before, one of the remote-controlled cargo ships that the Erasi used to blockade the Empire’s ship changed course as per its programming. The sudden change in course put it in the path of the Empire’s ship that was traveling at amazing speed. The moment the Empire’s ship struck the cargo ship, the space nearby was filled with a bright light, and then an incredible explosion sent pieces of both ships flying in thousands of directions.

* * *

Every single ship or station in the orbit of Tarabat watched as the Empire’s Sentinel ship fought against the Erasi. They didn’t know the reasons as to why, but they all watched in awe as the Empire’s warship stood against three Erasi battleships. They watched as the Empire’s warship destroyed the Erasi battleship, and then it disappeared, its wake leaving one station without power for long enough that its power-core destabilized, blowing a ship-sized hole in its side. And then there was a bright light, followed by an explosion and a rain of debris that pelted the stations in orbit, killing thousands.

Interlude I

A long time ago

Axull Darr stood on a hover-plate and sped through the streets of the Enduring's city. He guided the plate with his mind Sha, using the interface he himself had designed. The people walking on the streets looked at him with surprise and annoyance as he sped pass them; after all, no one was ever in a hurry among the People. Why rush somewhere when you had all eternity to get there? Axull disagreed with that mentality. Time was precious, and there were so many things to discover, to invent, or to learn.

Most of the people were perfectly fine with taking their time, contemplating on decisions and projects for years before they actually did something. Axull was not like them. He never stopped to contemplate as the rest of his people did. He jumped from project to project, always learning, always furthering his abilities. It was how he had risen so far for being so young. Axull was barely two hundred thousand years old, still in the first phase of his life, and yet he had achieved almost as much as a Grand Exatt, the oldest and the wisest of the People.

He finally reached the transport hub and found a free one. He entered and picked the symbol for the world-ship's main landing bay. Immediately, the chamber started moving, guiding him through the air over the city and then into the wall on the other side. The trip didn't take long, and soon enough he reached his destination. The iris opened and he guided his hover-plate out of the tube and into the bay.

Immediately, he noticed the newcomer, a shuttle with the markings of another world-ship. He approached the new shuttle just as a part of its side dissolved. Axull spotted his friend and raised his hand to wave. Waiss Gast, Axull Darr's best friend, glanced in Axull's direction and took to the air, flying over the people leaving the shuttle and those that were there to meet them.

Waiss landed in front of Axull with a big smile and reached over to give him a hug, nearly making Axull fall from the hover-plate.

"Axull, my friend, it has been too long," Waiss Gast said.

"It has," Axull agreed. He glanced behind his friend at the two large wings that were growing out of his back, and were in the process of being covered with Waiss's Shur At. "Those are new," he commented.

Waiss looked back excitedly. "Yes, I grew tired of having to use anti-grav harnesses all the time. So I had them grown. Most of the flesh is in fact a biological anti-grav, but the wings themselves can help with maneuvering."

Axull nodded in understanding. He had already figured out that the wings by themselves wouldn't be strong enough to make his friend fly. "Did you design them? Or did you model them on something?"

"I modeled them after the animal that I found while exploring a world in the Gatalax sector," Waiss said proudly. Then he looked at Axull mischievously. "You want them?" he asked with a smile.

Axull returned the smile while he made a negative gesture with his hand. "No, thank you. I am perfectly comfortable with my own body." Many of the People had taken to 'improving' themselves with genetic and physical alterations. Axull, on the other hand, had never had the desire to change the body he was born with. Aside from the reasonable genetic treatments, of course.

"So," Axull said, "why are you here? I came here as soon as I heard that your world-ship reached us and that a shuttle was on its way."

"What? You knew for certain that I would be here?" Waiss said grinningly.

Axull let out a chuckle. "As if you would miss seeing Ullax as quickly as possible."

Waiss looked embarrassed, and Axull felt a bit bad at the jab. He knew how Waiss felt about his twin, and he also knew that his sister wasn't interested. Not because she didn't like Waiss, but because she was too busy with her work.

"Well…" Waiss started. "She is in some part why I am here."

"She is?" Axull asked.

Then Waiss's face cleared, and an expression of pride and exhilaration filled his expression. "We found one," he said in a near whisper.

Axull's eyes immediately widened. "What stage?"

"Just entering stage three," Waiss said giddily.

"Are you certain that that is not an aberration?" Axull asked.

"We watched them for a long time, they are not an aberration."

"I can't believe it," Axull Darr said in shock. "The first race of higher intelligence we have ever encountered." He looked disbelievingly at his friend, and then his scientific mind took over and he launched into a series of questions. "Have you established a timeline? How do they compare on the it-scale? Wait, what do they look like?"

Waiss laughed and gestured for Axull to stop. "Slow down, there is time for all the questions and answers. I am here to recruit, actually; we need more people willing to spend large periods of time observing the lifeform, watching over them and doing tests."

"I'm in!" Axull said immediately. A chance to study another intelligent life was something he couldn't pass up.

“I knew you would be,” Waiss said, and then almost as an afterthought, he added, “I hoped that perhaps Ullax would be willing to come as well.”

Axull thought about it for a moment. “Her interests lie more in the mechanical arts,” Axull said, trying to prepare his best friend for a possible rejection.

“I know, we talked some time ago. Is she still stuck on the hive mind?” Waiss asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, perhaps she would like a change of pace; it might do her good to focus on something else for a time. She might even get an inspiration on how to solve her problem.”

Axull’s first instinct was to tell him that it was unlikely, but then he thought about it. His sister had been stuck on the same problem for a long time; a change of pace would do her good. “Alright, I’ll talk to her and try to convince her,” Axull said, but as soon as he saw the hopeful look Waiss gave him, he added, “But I don’t promise anything beyond that!”

“Of course, my friend.” Waiss gestured in the direction of the transport tubes. “Tell me what have you been up to lately?” And then as if he’d just noticed his hover-plate, he asked, “And what is that thing you are standing on?”

Axull laughed and pointed his hover-plate towards the transport tube.

Chapter Nine

July — Sol

"How long is it now?" Gotu, Administrator of Sol, asked Adjunct Larissa, who sat at the communications console in the Olympus Mons command center.

"Two hours past the second deadline," Adjunct Larissa answered.

"And none of our communications are reaching Tarabat?"

"We don't know if they are. It's like they aren't even there, our messages are just lost. All the relays in between Sol and Tarabat are functioning perfectly," Larissa answered.

"Sentinel Aileen wouldn't miss two deadlines, no matter what. In the worst case, she would send the Jewel with the message," Gotu said mostly to himself. Then, after a moment of silence, he turned back to the adjunct. "Get me a channel to Fleet Commander Stern. Send it to my office."

"Yes, sir."

Gotu walked out of the command center and into his office. Once there, he took a seat at his holo-table and saw that a channel with the fleet was already on hold and he accepted it.

"Fleet Commander," Gotu greeted once the hologram of Johanna Stern's face appeared in front of him. "I apologize if I interrupted you, but there is a situation and I was hoping that you could help me."

"Of course, Administrator, what can I help you with?" Fleet Commander Johanna Stern said. She and her fleet had been stationed at Sol ever since the Shara Daim attack, and aside from serving as a defense for Sol, they were tasked with patrolling this side of the Empire's border.

"We have lost contact with Tarabat, and I was hoping that you can spare a ship to go and scout out the situation," Gotu said.

"Do you have any idea what could've occurred?" Johanna asked.

"Speculation only, but the timing is suspicious. I have received a report from the Lord Sentinel in which he made me aware that Sentinel Aileen had been ordered to give an ultimatum to the Erasi. Either they commit fully to peace talks, or she leaves and the Empire's forces join the Shara Daim," Gotu said.

Johanna nodded in understanding. "You think that they have prevented her from leaving and sending a message to us."

"Yes," Gotu answered simply.

"I'll send a ship, Administrator," Johanna said.

"Thank you, Fleet Commander."

"I'll keep you posted," the Fleet Commander said and closed the channel.

Gotu leaned back in his chair, relieved. He didn't have any kind of jurisdiction over the Fleet Commander; she was Fleet and Gotu was from Warpath. The Sentinels were chosen from Warpath, but in truth they were separate from them. Gotu had worried that he would need to seek help from Warpath, which would've taken longer, but he should've known that the Fleet Commander would help. There wasn't really any political maneuvering or bad relations between the many divisions of the Empire.

Gotu turned to his holo-table. There was nothing really that he could do until they learned what the situation at Tarabat was, so he brought a window with the next report from his queue and started reading.

* * *

Tarabat

Aileen and her people sat quietly inside a small four-by-four room. They were hiding in Narateth's family home, or rather in its basement. Narateth's race was called Jugat, and they weren't a part of the Erasi. They did, however, live in its territory. They were a bipedal race that had two trunk-like appendages bellow their mouths, with two bulged eyes on the sides of their heads that made them have a sort of fish-like appearance. Their skin was thick and rough, usually gray in color. The Jugat survived by working as mediators, independent information brokers, or traders. Their kind didn't have a homeworld or even territory; they lived in family units spread out over Erasi territory.

The Empire had been working with the Jugat ever since Aileen arrived on Tarabat, at first using them as guides, and later as their eyes and ears to the lesser races of the Erasi, those who didn't have an official member status. The Jugat and the Empire worked well; the Empire paid them generously and they provided a loyal service. Now, on the other hand, they were hiding fugitives, and Aileen wasn't sure how long the goodwill her people had made for themselves would hold.

A click at the doors startled Aileen and the rest, and all raised their weapons just as Narateth entered. "It's only me."

Aileen and the rest lowered their weapons, but didn't really relax. Aileen stood and walked over to the alien. "Any news?"

"Communications outside of the system are still impossible. The Erasi insist that a hyperspace storm is over the system, which most believe is true. The news feeds are still looping the story that your ship attacked unprovoked, and that it means war between the Empire

and the Erasi. The problem is that they are not allowing any ship to leave the system; they say that it is for our protection and that your ships could arrive at any moment. The merchant guilds that had been working with you are obviously not happy, and there are many that managed to hobble together the more true sequence of events; they know that Erasi warships fired first. But they still don't want to speak out against the Erasi," Narateth said.

Aileen grimaced. There was no way that her people could get out if the Erasi weren't letting ships leave. She had entertained the idea of trying to get to Jurr on the other side of the planet, as she had no worry that he would be able to hide them more effectively, but it would be risky and, with no way of getting out of the system, not worth it.

"Are the Erasi looking for us?" Aileen asked.

"They are, although they don't want anyone to know that they are. They told the public that you were on the ship when it exploded, but they are looking covertly," Narateth said.

"Any chance that they allow ships out of the system anytime soon?" Aileen asked.

"Many are very vocal about not being able to leave, but in the end, no one wants to defy the Erasi. But if they don't find you soon, they might allow it, if only to tempt you to try to escape."

Aileen nodded. "Thank you, Narateth. The fact that you were willing to help us means a lot, and we will not forget it."

"Of course. You have always dealt more than fairly with me and mine; this is the least we can do," Narateth said, and then turned and left the room, closing the doors behind her.

Aileen only hoped that Narateth's goodwill lasted long enough for her to figure out a way to escape, or at least send a message to Sol.

Chapter Ten

July; Year 58 of the Empire — Erasi border system

Garash finished reading the latest report from the Shara Daim territory, and shook his head in annoyance. He and Valanaru were in his command center on board the End of Hope as Garash made the final preparations for the fleet's departure.

"This will be another inconvenience," Valanaru said, concerning the report.

Garash glared at the Gatrey. "Their presence is inconsequential for my plans."

"Did you forget who we are talking about? This is the greatest of their Dai Sha, who took the rule of the Shara Daim by force, and one of the Empire's leaders, who defeated both our forces and hers. Do not underestimate them," Valanaru warned.

"They are outnumbered, and the Empire's troops will not engage ours until they exhaust all diplomatic avenues. And in any case, Hanaru will soon begin executing his orders, and that will take care of any involvement by the Empire," Garash added.

"Those diplomatic avenues will close as soon as they realize that something is wrong on Tarabat," Valanaru said.

"That incident works in our advantage; it will take time for them to check the situation out, and by then we will have already struck at the Shara Daim and Hanaru will have given the Empire other things to worry about," Garash insisted.

"You, better than anyone, should understand that things don't always work out the way we want them to, Son of Carnage. Different races react differently to threats," Valanaru said evenly. "And the fact that the Kar Daim and her consort have moved to the front means that they will restart the offensive before our fleets can arrive. Unless you decide to split them up and send them through trans-space, we will arrive too late."

"And you would counsel splitting my forces?" Garash asked. He had thought about it; it would mean that some elements of his fleet would arrive faster, but the limits on trans-space meant that he could only send a small portion of his fleet through and wait until the trans-route reopened to send another. And that made those smaller taskforces vulnerable to ambush by a superior number. Hyperspace might be a bit slower, but also allowed him to move his fleet in full force.

Valanaru made a show of pretending to think about it, but Garash had known the Weaver for a long time and could see right through her. "It is an option," she started. "We could reinforce all the hub

systems under our control faster, true, and we could probably fight of the Shara Daim counteroffensive. Then we could take time to decide how to proceed. But perhaps a small sacrifice could give us a larger reward."

"I'm listening," Garash said. He and Valanaru might not have agreed on many things, but in the end, they were both Erasi.

Garash felt her access the holo-table and a ringed planet appeared. He looked at the data and saw that its location was in Shara Daim territory. Garash turned and looked at Valanaru questioningly.

"That world is not really important, there is nothing of worth there. It has few trans-routes and almost no resources of note; the Shara Daim don't even have a single outpost in that system. But that world has one interesting thing about it," Valanaru said, and the holo zoomed in. "That storm covers more than half the planet, and it rages constantly and is electromagnetically charged."

"And what does that have to do with anything?" Garash asked, already growing impatient. He might have been willing to listen to the Weaver, but he hated her games.

"The Shara Daim just went through a major change, and they are powerful because their Dai Sha are powerful and unified. They have been following the Kar Daim because they have had no choice; she forced them to follow her. And with her coming to the front, they will be even more dangerous. A force is only as strong as its commander."

"Meaning?"

"We introduce chaos into the Shara Daim. Without Kar Daim to lead them, they will shatter," Valanaru said.

Garash laughed. "There is no way that we can get to her."

"Of course not, we will make her come to us," Valanaru retorted, raising her hand to point at the planet spinning in front of them. "There."

"How?"

Valanaru told him.

* * *

Garash stood on the command center of his devastator warship, End of Hope, and watched as his massive fleet prepared to leave. All of his ships had been refueled and stocked with ammunition and provisions for the continuation of the invasion, and the levy fleet had been assembled. The final count put his individual fleets number at one hundred modern Erasi fleets and thirty-eight levy fleets. A force large enough to deal with the Shara Daim.

In the end, Garash had decided to follow the Weaver's plan, even

though he hated those types of manipulations. Her plan would probably result in the deaths of many of his people, but in the end, it would be worth it, because no matter what Garash said when he was speaking with Valanaru, he was very aware that this invasion was time-sensitive. He couldn't be drawn into a war that would last centuries; at most, they had a couple of decades before the ships he'd taken from the front were missed, and that meant that he needed to finish the Shara Daim cleanly and with as few losses as possible.

And that meant that his forces would move as one large fleet using hyperspace. It would take them longer to reach the front, and they would arrive after the Shara Daim resumed the hostilities, so they wouldn't be able to help the forces already there. But if the Weaver's plan was going to work, a sacrifice had to be made.

Garash's subordinate reported that all ships were ready to depart, and with one last look at the holo showing the entire fleet, Garash gave the order. In a blink of an eye, his massive fleet entered hyperspace and disappeared.

* * *

After the Erasi fleet left, a small ship left its hiding place inside the system's asteroid field. It entered FTL and made its way to the edge of the hyperspace barrier. In a flash, it too departed the system.

Chapter Eleven

September; Year 58 of the Empire — Erasi-Shara Daim front

Adrian sat on board the Veritas and watched the battle play out on the holo in front of him. The Shara Daim had attacked a hub system that the Erasi had taken from them. Adrian's ships had scouted the surroundings and made sure that no Erasi force was close enough to come to this systems aid, and now his twelve fleets were watching from the sidelines. That wouldn't be the case for long; Aileen had orders to give the Erasi an ultimatum. If they refused, the Empire would fully commit to the war; if they accepted, the real talks would begin. Only he doubted that they would accept. Their reinforcements had left the system they had been gathering in, which meant that soon enough they would have a lot more Erasi ships to worry about.

Tomas had given Adrian leave to join in the fighting the moment that those forces arrived, taking that as a certain sign that the Erasi would not deal in good faith. And they had enough recordings of their diplomatic talks that they would make sure that all knew that the Empire was prepared to deal with the Erasi. And that was what was ultimately important, and why they held back. Perception was a powerful thing, Adrian had seen that with the Shara Daim. They were regarded as completely untrustworthy, and no race wanted to trade with them. A large part of that was their own fault, but in order to achieve its goals, the Empire couldn't afford to be seen as such. The smaller races needed to see them as good neighbors.

But even though he understood that, it didn't mean that he was any less frustrated with having to stand on the sidelines. And not only because the Empire was still in talks with the Erasi, but because Anessa needed to do this on her own. She needed to win her people's trust, and to do that she needed to win on her own. On the holo, Adrian could see the battle in real time. He had drones close to the battles and was receiving data from several Shara Daim ships. The Shara Daim were winning.

Anessa had brought fifty Legions, two of which were upgraded with skim drives, but she hadn't used them yet; she was planning on keeping that capability a secret for now. The Erasi had ten fleets in the system plus the fixed defenses that they had brought to defend the system. Anessa's Legions arrived in system two days ago through hyperspace. That had allowed the Erasi to pull their forces—from all around the system—behind the defenses around the fifth planet, where they waited for her Legions. Anessa had spent the first day bombarding their defensive platforms, expending a large number of missiles to cut the number of defensive platforms down before she

brought her Legions in closer range.

From there, she had tested the Erasi, looking for weaknesses in their formation, and once she'd found one, she had pressed. By then, the Erasi ships no longer had the protection of the platforms, and when she brought the Legions in, they ran, making the battle into a prolonged moving engagement that stretched across the system as Erasi fleets tried to spread out and escape. They ultimately failed, but Anessa had anticipated that and had ordered ten of her Legions to key positions around the system prior to the battle, positions from which they could cut off the Erasi fleets' most probable escape routes. There were several smaller engagements occurring in the system as Shara Daim Legions pursued the fleeing Erasi ships.

Adrian checked up on Anessa's ship, the Bloodbringer. She had led the battle well, and her ship had engaged the enemy several times, but fortunately she hadn't taken any unnecessary risks. Adrian glanced to his side where Sora was sitting and watching the holo with him. He wasn't sure if she could understand the images, but he wouldn't have been surprised. But he knew that she was worried about her sibling, Akash, who was on the Bloodbringer with Anessa. Adrian was both surprised and glad to see that his wolions had taken to her, and usually when Adrian and Anessa were apart, one of them would be with her. He reached over with his hand and patted Sora behind the ears, reassuring her that all was well.

"They won," Rasshat, Veritas's Ship Master, said as he moved his large body to stand on Adrian's other side.

Adrian watched the Shara Daim Legions hunt down the few remaining stragglers. "They did," he responded, and turned to look at the large Guxcacul Ship Master. Adrian didn't have the translator in his imp turned on at the moment, so he heard the Guxcacul speak in his own language, which was no problem for Adrian—he had learned their language a long time ago. The Erasi translators had made things in the Empire much easier, and the adapted version that all people of the Empire now held in their implants was even better than the Erasi original. As long as both parties had translators, each side would hear speech in their language. Of course, only already known languages could be translated in this manner, but it was still a great tool. Adrian liked to turn off the translations on his side for the most part, liking to practice understanding different languages on his own.

"The Erasi still have troops on the ground. It will be a hard fight; they've had time to dig in," Rasshat said.

"Yes, but the Kar Daim has brought enough troops," Adrian said as he switched the holo to show troop transports in orbit of the world dropping down through the atmosphere. With this win the Erasi forces in the Shara Daim territory had been reduced by more than half of

their initial number to only twenty-three fleets spread across another two hub systems and several other less important systems that they had taken control of. “As soon as they finish here we will be moving on to the next target,” Adrian said. His scouts had discovered three Erasi fleets moving towards one of the hub systems, and if the Shara Daim move quickly enough, they would be able to ambush them before they reached an Erasi-controlled system, although that would mean that they would need to send only ten Legions through the trans-lane, having the others follow through hyperspace. But Anessa had decided that it was worth it.

“And we still can’t join in the fight?” Rasshat asked.

“Not until their reinforcements arrive or the talks end,” Adrian answered. “The Shara Daim don’t really need our firepower; they have cut down the Erasi numbers enough that they have an advantage, and with our ships scouting for them, they have better intel as well. There is a reason why the Erasi attacked while the Shara Daim Legions were out of position. Now when the Shara Daim fleets are gathered, the Erasi will not have an easy time. Until those ships arrive, then they will need all the help they can get.”

* * *

Anessa felt her ship shake slightly as an Erasi missile passed through a small hole in the Bloodbringer’s shields to detonate against the hull.

“Report?” her Legion’s commander, Dai Sha Garaam, asked.

“Hull breach on level nine; repair group is on its way, Dai Sha,” a Va Sun answered.

Anessa still felt uncomfortable with watching someone else command her Legion and ship, but after many long talks, Adrian had convinced her that she as Kar Daim should assume command over all the Legions. And she could see the benefits of that, but it still felt foreign to her. She was using a command board based on the Empire’s technology to watch the battle, adapted to her people’s telepathic interfaces so that it could be used by the combination of telepathy and hand gestures. The Empire’s version was controlled by hand and their implants, and no matter how much Adrian tried to convince her that they were perfectly safe, she was not ready to put a device inside her head.

She watched several battles play out on the ‘c-board’ and sent additional orders where required. Meanwhile, Garaam, Anessa’s best friend and the new commander of the First Legion, battled a fleeing Erasi formation. Anessa watched as Garaam commanded the battle,

and while she completely trusted her friend, a part of her that was still a Dai Sha wanted to take charge directly. But she resisted the urge, focusing instead on the battles in front of her raging across the entire system.

* * *

Anessa entered her quarters exhausted, immediately dropping to her bed. She felt someone get on the bed and looked at the wolion—Akash—who had jumped on the bed and laid at the foot of it, making himself comfortable. Anessa was still surprised at how much she had come to care for the beasts. The first time she had seen Adrian's two wolions, they had been attacking her, defending Adrian. And Anessa was sure that she had hurt Akash during the fight, and yet somehow he had come to care for her as if she had been by his side as long as Adrian had.

And she knew that beyond any doubt, as the wolions had Sha abilities—they could project emotions. She didn't know what the wolions saw in her, but she was glad for their affection. Her life had changed so much since that first encounter. She had taken the rule of Shara Daim by force, and she had started a… relationship with Adrian. Someone who was technically the same species as her, but not really. They were very different, and yet they understood each other. They had found comfort in each other's presence that neither of them had felt before. But the main reason as to why she had made the decision to make him her Dal A'sha—her life partner—was because she needed to make sure that the alliance between the Empire and the Shara Daim succeeded.

Ever since she had become the Kar Daim, she'd known that they needed that alliance to fight off the Erasi. She had learned everything that the Elders had kept from their people, and she knew exactly how unprepared the Shara Daim were for a true war against someone who was technologically their equal. Her Legions had stopped and were now in the process of pushing back the Erasi invading force, but that initial force had never been her true concern. She'd always known that once the Legions gathered, they would be able to defeat them. Her worry had always been the prospect of an extended war. The Shara Daim industry couldn't match that of the Erasi, who had more people, more worlds, and more resources, who had good relations with other races and benefited greatly from trade with them, while the Shara Daim were widely hated by their neighbors—which was their own fault—and had stagnated over the years under the Elders' guidance. The Erasi would win any prolonged war, and her Legions

didn't have enough strength to push into the Erasi territory.

The Shara Daim needed an ally, and the Empire was probably the only race that was willing to deal with them. She needed to do everything in her power to make sure that that alliance succeeded, even if she had to bind her life to someone she despised. Fortunately, she didn't despise Adrian. Well, she had in the beginning when he had taken her prisoner. But since then, she had come to respect him greatly, both him as a person and his skills, and over time that had turned into affection.

The alliance with the Empire had already benefited the Shara Daim greatly, as the Empire had shared some of its advanced technology and brought experts to teach her people on how to operate it. The original agreement was for the Empire to provide military assistance to push the Erasi out of Shara Daim territory, but when the Erasi had reached out to them to 'negotiate,' Adrian had asked her to change the agreement a little. The Emperor wanted to try and reach a peaceful solution, something that her people didn't take well, but in return for the Shara Daim agreeing to try a diplomatic avenue, they had shared their inter-system FTL technology. They had also sent over a large fabricating ship to speed up the construction of the new Shara Daim shipyards that would utilize that technology.

Now, the situation was very different. Every Shara Daim shipyard was working at full power to build new Legions, and the fabricating shipyards were under construction, and with the trade with the Empire, the notion of a prolonged war was no longer as dire. Or it wasn't until they'd learned of the force that the Erasi had assembled. Now she wasn't sure that they could win, not without losing a lot of territory and Legions.

But for now, she had the upper hand. She closed her eyes and forced herself to rest. Tomorrow her Legions would leave the system to ambush several Erasi fleets, pushing their momentary advantage.

Chapter Twelve

September; Year 58 of the Empire — Unknown system — Erasi super battleship

Weaver Hanaru looked over the new information with interest. His new stealth ships had proven to be undetectable by whatever technology the Empire used to see their previous generation, and the scouts had sent back a lot of very interesting information. They had finally found the Empire's more developed systems and a few possible targets. They had also found the Empire's principal system—Sanctuary. On a whim, Hanaru had sent one of the scouts to a system he had seen on a map that he received from the Ancient, a system that was inside a nebula.

That system had been the most developed one they'd found to date, with several planets and dozens of planetoids, hundreds of stations, shipyards, mining stations, and tens of thousands of ships moving around. Immediately, it was apparent that it was their principal system, and the only reason they had found it was because they'd known that that system was there. The system had only one incoming trans-route, and a few outgoings, but Hanaru's scouts couldn't use trans-routes because using them was clearly detectable. Instead, they moved through hyperspace, and the only reason that they could reach Sanctuary was because they knew its exact location. His scouts had dropped out of hyperspace inside the nebula just enough to hide their entrance, but close enough to the clearing inside the nebula that they were safe from the system's Oort cloud, which was hidden in the nebula.

Immediately, Hanaru saw the advantage of a hidden system. Unless one knew the exact location where they could drop out of hyperspace, they would've never found it, and Hanaru only knew because the Ancient's people had passed through it and mapped it out. There was a note in the maps that said that the system was habitable and rich, but that they were unwilling to settle a system which wasn't a hub. Every race preferred hub systems to those that had few trans-routes; they were tactical positions that provided a perfect launching pad for growth. The Empire seemed like it didn't care for that.

Now Hanaru had a choice to make: to hit one of the other of their large systems, or to hit Sanctuary. This system did have the biggest shipyard that they had detected to date, and he didn't have much time to search for others, and attacking it would send a right message. The plan was to cripple the Empire's manufacturing ability while also forcing them to pull their forces back to defend their own territory, allowing the Ancient to deal only with the Shara Daim.

The only problem Hanaru saw was that this system was well defended—very well defended, actually. Not as well defended as the core systems of the Erasi, but still more than what he had thought that he would find. He also couldn't identify everything; the scout was scanning the system passively, and while some objects could be identified easily based on the traffic to and from them, as well as their size, other objects were unknown to him. They could have been anything from more defenses to simple satellites; there was no way of knowing.

But they did find matches on the known Empire defenses. This system had two stations just like the one that had showed up in Sol, both positioned at the two incoming trans-routes; obviously those stations had been designed to defend trans-points. And there were several thousands of their defensive platforms. That was a problem. He didn't have the numbers nor enough ammunition to take care of those. Although he didn't really need to, his job was to wreak as much havoc as he possibly could and then leave and attack another system.

Hanaru brought a scan of the system from the Ancient's maps and added all the scans from his scouts, overlapping the two. The Empire hadn't moved much towards the inner border of the nebula; presumably because they didn't yet need the resources of the third asteroid ring. Hanaru saw that there were only a few patrols moving around there, and seemingly in set patterns.

Hanaru looked over the data one more time, a plan forming in his mind.

Chapter Thirteen

Occupied Shara Daim territory — Har Kaleras sector — Bloodbringer

Ten Shara Daim Legions exited the trans-space and entered the system. Immediately, Anessa used the new c-board to send a message to all of the ships in her First and Second Legion.

"Move away from the rest of the Legions. Power up weapons, load missiles, and raise shields. Be ready to skim on my command," she ordered, and closed the channel. She looked at Garaam, who shook her head.

"They are not close enough for passive sensors to see them yet," Garaam answered Anessa's questioning look.

"Prepare to go to active scanners," Anessa ordered. The active scanners would allow them to see far farther than the passive light sensors could, but it would also reveal her Legions to their intended target. The Erasi fleets that were supposed to be traveling through this system would detect the tachyon scan immediately. Hopefully the Erasi were unaware that two of her Legions had been equipped with the Empire's skim drives and would be caught off guard.

"All weapons ready. We can initiate the scan on your command, Kar Daim," Garaam reported.

Anessa opened a channel to Dai Sha Karoom of the Twenty-Second Legion. "Karoom, follow us as soon as we skim. Best speed. Be ready to join in the fighting."

"Understood, Kar Daim," Karoom answered, and Anessa closed the channel.

She turned to Garaam and gave the order. "Initiate the scan."

A moment later, the holo in front of the c-board that was connected to all the sensors in the Legions started filling up with up to date information.

"There they are, two light minutes from the fifth planet," Garaam reported.

"Skim us!" Anessa said quickly. The Erasi would have detected the scan and would soon go to active scans themselves. Hopefully the skim would confuse them, as it seemed a bit confusing on scans, and would allow her two Legions to catch them off guard.

As soon as Anessa gave the order, both of her Legions engaged their skim drives. In a heartbeat, both Legions had entered FTL. The plan had always been for them to drop out of FTL above the Erasi formation. Adrian had suggested that she might want to split her two Legions and catch the Erasi fleets from the sides in a crossfire, but Anessa believed that keeping her two Legions together would serve her better. She could give off a far stronger first shot and her two

Legions would have much easier time defending when they were together. Adrian's plan was good, but much better suited for the Empire's fleets; they had drone ships that could help them soak up damage that Anessa's ships couldn't, not without losing far more lives in the process.

"Exiting skim in forty-six seconds," a Va Sun at the navigation console reported.

Anessa was still amazed that they could travel through a system so fast. She had seen what one could do with this ability in Sol, when Adrian had used it to ambush them. And now she was about to do the same to the Erasi.

"Exiting skim in fifteen," the Va Sun reported.

"Activate communication jamming as soon we are out. Acquire targets and fire as soon as you have them. Focus on their super battleships," Garaam ordered over the c-board's comms.

"Exiting skim in five!"

Everyone on the bridge watched the countdown, and as soon as it hit zero, they sprang into action. Both Legions exited at the same time; the Empire's people had given them software that helped with the synchronization of the skims, and as soon as they exited, their scanner went off, getting far more detailed data on everything around them.

Anessa checked her c-board and saw that the Erasi were completely unprepared. Their formation was loose, and their shields were down. As soon as her Legions locked on to targets, her ships fired. A continuous stream of missiles exited every one of her ships, crossing the short distance to the Erasi ships. Her capital ships opened fire with their main weapons and dark blue energy beams reached out from her ships to maul the undefended hulls of the Erasi; her smaller ships used their smaller versions of the same weapon to add to the carnage. The short-range plasma maulers of her ships each fired half a dozen contained plasma bolts in quick succession, before cooling off for ten seconds and firing again, scorching and eating into the Erasi ships.

A great majority of her ships' missiles passed almost unopposed to hit the Erasi warships; only several of their ships managed to bring their point defense online in time to do anything, but in the end, it wasn't nearly enough. Shara Daim missiles were more powerful than their Erasi and the Empire counterparts, although they didn't have as good of evading systems as the Empire's or the Erasi missiles had. But it didn't matter; with no real defensive net, the thousands of missiles struck the hulls of the Erasi battleships and super battleships, creating large craters in their hulls, which her particle weapons took advantage of. The Erasi warships were exploding at an amazing rate, with their losses after the first minute already climbing close to a thousand, and

most of the destroyed ships being of their larger class.

And then, sporadically across their formation, their shields came online along with their point defense. The Erasi tightened their formation and started fighting back. Anessa checked the c-board and saw that the rest of her forces were an hour away, and while her forces were still outnumbered, her initial attack had leveled the playing field as her two Legions' attack had destroyed a large number of the Erasi heavy warships.

She had the upper hand. Anessa led the battle from her c-board, shifting the focus of her two Legions as needed. And as the battle continued, it became apparent that the initial attack had shaken the Erasi enough that they were in a state of disarray. Their attempt at fighting back crumbled under the continuous pressure of her two Legions. Eventually they broke and attempted to flee, but by then the rest of her Legions had arrived. In the end, no message left the ambushed Erasi fleets, and no Erasi warship survived to bring word of what had happened.

Chapter Fourteen

October; Year 58 of the Empire — Shara Daim territory — Har Kaleras sector

"What do you think about this?" Anessa asked the room.

Adrian, Anessa, and her top Legion commanders Dai Sha Garaam and Dai Sha Karoom stood in a large room on board the Bloodbringer, which was in orbit of the recently retaken world in the first hub system Anessa's forces had taken back. They had been planning their next assault when an Erasi scout ship had entered the system. Immediately, it had transmitted a message to the Bloodbringer, and after watching it, Dai Sha Garaam had called Anessa, Adrian, and Dai Sha Karoom to this meeting room to watch it as well.

"We did hit them hard; they lost a lot of ships. It could be that they have realized that continuing this war would be far more costly than they initially assumed," Dai Sha Garaam answered.

"They have more than double our numbers as reinforcements," Dai Sha Karoom added.

"That doesn't mean that they couldn't have changed their minds. We have fought them at a disadvantage from the start. And the threat of our and the Empire's alliance might be enough for them to realize that it would cost them much to continue this war," Garaam retorted.

"More than possible is that they will ask us to surrender. They have arrived in Har Aras sector and must believe that we know about their reinforcements. We might have surprised them by our counterattacks, but I doubt that they think that they can lose," Karoom said.

"Will the Empire's forces join in the fighting now?" Garaam asked Adrian.

"My orders were to wait until their reinforcements arrive, so that we can be sure that they don't want peace. But I was also ordered to answer any diplomatic request. We need to at least hear what they have to say," Adrian answered.

"But?" Anessa asked, feeling that there was something that Adrian kept back.

"The timing is suspicious. Until now, they have always stalled. Although, it is possible that they simply couldn't deal until now. The message said that we would deal with an O'fa; as far as I am aware, they are the leaders of the Erasi," Adrian answered.

"We had never paid much attention to the governments of other races," Anessa said remorsefully. "But we do know that these O'fa are highly regarded in the Erasi."

"Then there is the possibility that their stalling wasn't in order for

that fleet to arrive; they might not have been able to deal and have been waiting for this O'fa. If our assumption that these reinforcements arrived from deep within the Erasi territory, then they could've been sent here long before the Empire even met the Erasi," Adrian said.

"So you advise that we accept this invitation?" Anessa asked.

"As long as the Erasi want to talk, I am bound by words of my Emperor. The Empire wants peace; if the Erasi will not be reasonable, we will make good on our promise of military aid, but all avenues of diplomacy need to be explored before then," Adrian said.

"And if they ask for our surrender?" Garaam asked.

"Then we will abandon any further dealings with the Erasi and my ships will join yours," Adrian responded.

Garaam nodded, seemingly satisfied with his answer. "The Erasi have a lot more ships than both of our forces combined, and you will still fight with us?"

"Those were the terms of our alliance. We might not have been aware of their reinforcements, but we don't go back on our word," Adrian answered. "And with the technology we have shared with you, we only need to stall that fleet until we have a force capable of defeating them."

"That will not be that easy," Karoom added.

"No. You will lose a lot of worlds; they will push into your territory, killing and subjugating millions. But your territory is large. If we slow their advance enough, and protect your shipbuilding systems, we can win. But no war is ever certain; we could defeat them with far smaller numbers, or we could lose no matter what we do."

"Yes, that is true. Although I doubt that many other Dai Sha can see that," Karoom said, turning to look at his Kar Daim. "These victories have made our Dai Sha emboldened; they think that we are far superior to the Erasi. You leading these battles has strengthened your rule, Kar Daim. But I fear that it has also reinforced their old beliefs, that we are superior to all others."

Garaam grimaced. "He is right, Anessa. I have seen it among the others. They believe in you now, but our victories have crippled the views we were trying to spread. Any loss will now hit us far harder."

"I couldn't leave our systems in Erasi control," Anessa said.

"Of course not. I just want you to understand the state of your Legions. If you ask them to attack a force three times larger than ours, they will follow you, completely believing that they will win, that there is no way for them to lose," Garaam clarified.

"I have no choice now; it was either waiting for a stab in the back or showing that I am worthy of being followed," Anessa stated.

"The Dai Sha are behind you now, fully. But if we start losing, their loyalty will waver," Karoom cautioned.

“I know, that’s why we need to end this war quickly,” Anessa said, turning to look at Adrian. “I know that you want to prolong this conflict, to build enough forces to be able to defeat the Erasi with little risk. But it is not your worlds and people at stake. I can’t let this war continue; we need to find a way to end it.”

Adrian sighed. “I understand. If that is your wish, then talking to the Erasi should be your first step. There must be a reason as to why they want to talk now. Perhaps they are planning something, or perhaps they truly want to talk; either way, you have no choice now.”

“I am willing to talk with them, but you know my terms. I will not back down. Either they accept or they will pay the price,” Anessa said, then turned to Garaam. “What about this system where they want us to meet? Is there anything about it that might suggest that they are planning something?”

Garaam turned to the holo and brought up the system in question. “It is an insignificant system, it has no resources, no habitable planet. The world they want us to meet on, Numvani, does have breathable atmosphere, and it is charged and almost constantly in flux, resulting in frequent storms. There is a massive storm raging across the planet at all times, which makes the planet unsuitable for life on the surface. They want to meet on the small island as neutral ground. As for the rest of the system… it has no trans-routes, no asteroid fields, only three other planets that are far away from each other, no moons—nothing that would suggest a trap. In truth, it is a perfect neutral ground; there is no place where they can make an ambush.”

“Good. They said that we are to bring only one ship to the planet?” Anessa asked.

Garaam gestured in agreement. “Yes, they wish to speak with you directly, which is odd, as the Erasi rarely deal directly with the rulers of other empires; usually all negotiations are conducted by emissaries. But then again, their message said that they will be sending an O’fa, who are as far as we know the leaders of the Erasi. I doubt that they will be willing to risk an O’fa to set up a trap,” Garaam said, then turned to look at Adrian. “The message did say that they don’t want your ships in the system; your FTL ability could be used to ambush them. Only one Shara Daim ship can go to the planet. And they are interested in speaking with you as well.”

“I assume that both sides will bring only a single ship in the system?” Adrian asked.

“Yes, and they will do so at the same time,” Garaam answered.

“That suggests that they don’t yet know that some of your ships have been fitted with our skim drives,” Adrian said.

“It does suggest that, yes,” Garaam said.

“That is one more thing in our favor. Alright, I guess that we will

be using the Bloodbringer?" Adrian asked Anessa.

"Of course," Anessa answered.

"Alright, then," Adrian said, and they started planning for the meeting.

Chapter Fifteen

October; Year 58 of the Empire — Sanctuary system

Tomas sat in the meeting room inside his palace with his closest friends and advisors, the four people that together made the ruling council of Sanctuary system—Fleets Master Laura Reiss, Army Master Jack Gin, Minister of Science Hyeon Seo-yun, and Minister of Civil Service Nadia Wilson. They were in the middle of their weekly meeting concerning matters of the system.

"The next agenda is Fleet," Nadia said as Jack finished his report.

"Thanks, Nadia," Laura said as she stood up. "As far as the fleets themselves go, everything is fine. The increase in the Eurus shipyards is going according to plans, with four more yards going fully online in five days. I have taken the liberty of stopping the production on the Star-Guard Platforms Two and Three and moved the resources to the Star-Guard One, which is, relatively speaking, finished. We are going to be doing shield testing for the next month or two. And the resources that were supposed to go to Star-Guard Two and Three will be rerouted to the shipyards to increase our ship productions. Also, I want to increase the number of defense platforms around Sanctuary itself. With the prospect of a war with the Erasi, I want us to be ready. As far as everything else, there are no notable problems."

"We have been sending all extra platforms out to Sol and the Shara Daim; is it really necessary?" Tomas asked. "Sanctuary is well protected, but even if it wasn't, it is very well hidden; you need to know its location in order to actually find it, and our trans-points are defended by the stations."

"It's not an immediate concern, but I want you to have it in mind," Laura added.

"Of course. Anything else?" Tomas asked.

"No, that is all," Laura responded.

"The next on the agenda is sciences," Nadia announced, and Seo-yun stood and started updating them on the status on several projects her people were currently working on.

* * *

Seo-yun sat in her office relaxing and reading the scientific data from the sphere. It still amazed her just how much they had gotten wrong, how many theories and laws of the universe they had been outright wrong about or had simply misunderstood. And there was so much more in the data, knowledge spanning an incredible period of

time, and she was only at the beginning. She had tried reading the knowledge the People had at their end, but frankly she couldn't understand any of it. The terms and equations were alien to her, so she had started reading from the beginning, trying to understand the concepts that were the foundations of what the People had at their end. The Empire was doing the same, albeit slowly, as they were actually testing out and attempting to gain the full understanding and control over the technology and knowledge.

Seo-yun was just reading a bit ahead. For example, she was currently reading about dimensions. Humanity had theories about other dimensions, and most believed that other dimensions were separate from ours. The metaphor used often was that each dimension was a floor in a multistoried building, each individual and isolated. The People believed—at least at the point she had reached to—that dimensions existed on a spectrum, overlapping each other. Hyperspace was a different dimension, one that overlapped the most with our own, which was why it was relatively easy to access.

However, as it overlapped our dimension so much, it also meant that our dimension had some influence on it, which was why you couldn't enter hyperspace when close to a star. Trans-space was another dimension, one that had a bit less overlap with ours, and whose rules were slightly different, which was why it could only be accessed through trans-points, which the People realized were in fact places where the border between our two dimensions was weaker. Although there seemed to be a bit of a gap with their knowledge of those dimensions. The People hadn't used hyperspace or trans-space for travel until very late in their civilization's lifespan, as she read it almost seemed as if they hadn't been aware of them. They used skim drives for FTL, and a bit later something they called access points, which were massive stations built inside suns, powered by them to move ships instantaneously between these points. Their discovery of trans-space and hyperspace seemed almost an afterthought, something that developed long after they reached their peak.

Then there was their discovery that higher intelligence required that the lifeform was capable of accessing the Sha, even if it was without the lifeform's conscious ability. Looking back at the data, and then human history, Seo-yun had discovered that while humans didn't have that conscious ability to manipulate the Sha, they did however have a connection to the Sha even before Adrian awakened it. It was manifested in small things, like people feeling that something was wrong when a bad thing was about to happen, one sibling feeling the death of another from far away, those kinds of things. Or at least that was what Axull Darr had written about the way it would be manifested. Not in those words, but similar.

And there so many other marvels and achievements that the People had discovered. And all of that knowledge was there for her to access. In a way, that saddened Seo-yun; knowledge was her life's pursuit, and now there wasn't anything left to discover, only things to master and add to. At least until they reached the level of the People and moved beyond them. Seo-yun knew that there were things that they didn't know—the reason why they were dying, for one. Perhaps one day she would find the answer.

* * *

Adjutant Jonas sat at the sensor station on board the patrol ship Pharaoh. He was one of three others in command center during the third shift. It was a boring post. Jonas was looking over the passive and active sensors that were checking the space around the ship on their patrol route that took them to the edge of the nebula. Jonas had always wondered what it was like to be posted on a true fleet warship. He thought that it must be much more exciting, barring the possibility of death.

Sometimes when he got especially bored during his shifts, he toyed with the idea of putting in a request for a transfer. But then he inevitably remembered that the Empire was at war, or soon it would be, and he always gave up on the notion. Being bored on a patrol ship in the safest place in the Empire was infinitely better than being dead. So, Jonas resigned himself to boredom and almost mechanically looking over the data in front of him.

He was so lost in his musings that he almost missed an item that popped up on his screen. He saw that the ship's AI had marked a scan with low priority for him to check out. Jonas frowned and took a deeper look at the data. Apparently, the ship's sensors had detected a slight irregularity with the nebula density, which had disappeared after three point two seconds. Jonas checked and saw that there was no more data, and that the only reason the AI had marked it was because such scans had never before been encountered.

Jonas looked at the Low Prime sitting in the command chair with a blank look on his eyes that meant that he was reading a book on his imp, as he always did during the third shift. Jonas debated on whether to bother the Low Prime or not, and after a minute or two of thinking it over stood and walked over.

"Low Prime?" Jonas asked, and saw his superior blink a few times and then focus on him.

"Yes, Jonas?" Low Prime said, annoyed.

"The ship's AI brought a strange scan to my attention. Here,"

Jonas said quickly, and then accessed the holo table in front of the command chair and brought out the scan.

Low Prime looked at the scans thoughtfully for a minute, and then turned to look at Jonas. “This is unusual, but then again we’ve never had reliable scans this close to the nebula,” Low Prime said. Then he looked back at the scans. “Do we have an exact location on where this was picked up?”

“Yes, Low Prime,” Jonas said.

“Alright, let’s get an active ping in that region,” Low Prime ordered.

Jonas let out the breath he had been holding in relief. Apparently he had done the right thing by bringing this up. “Right away, sir.”

Jonas went back to his station and targeted the active scanners. A moment later, new scans showed up on his console.

“Anything strange?” Low Prime said from right behind Jonas, making him start.

“Uh, nothing out of the ordinary, sir. I mean, there is interference, but it is consistent with every other scan inside the nebula,” Jonas answered.

Low Prime nodded. “Alright, I’ll mark this in the report for the High Prime as low priority. Good job.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jonas said as the Low Prime moved back to the command chair and continued reading his book.

* * *

“Is everything ready?” Hanaru, Weaver of the Erasi, asked.

“It is,” Hanaru’s second in command answered. “The stealth ships are on the way and will reach their targets in about a month. They have loaded up on rocks and are calculating the trajectories and speeds.”

“Good, that’s enough time for us to prepare our attack,” Hanaru said. “And we weren’t detected?”

“No, Weaver. There was a close encounter with an Empire patrol ship, but our new stealth ships proved superior to the Empire’s sensors.”

“They didn’t see us?” Hanaru asked.

“They detected something, most likely the nebula’s interference caused something detectable, but it wasn’t enough to betray our presence.”

“Good, and everything else in on schedule?” Hanaru asked.

“It is.”

“Gather the commanders. I want one last planning session before

we attack."

"As you wish, Weaver," Hanaru's second in command said, and left him alone in the room.

Hanaru looked over the scans of the Empire's Sanctuary system. It was as detailed as their stealth ships could get it without revealing their presence. There were many uncertainties, but in the end, they didn't matter. Hanaru was given a mission that he had to fulfill, and he fully intended to. With a thought, he switched the holo off and left the room.

Chapter Sixteen

Sol

Gotu sat down at the table in his office, and with a thought accepted the incoming call. “Fleet Commander, I hope that you have news for me.”

“I do,” Fleet Commander Johanna Stern said. “My scout ship sent a message; they managed to enter the Tarabat system undetected. The good news is that the Tarabat system is still there; the bad news is that all hyperspace transmissions in the proximity of planet Tarabat itself are impossible—whether by jamming or by natural phenomenon, we don’t know. The bad news is that there are clear signs of a battle in the orbit. My ship detected several debris fields, and a few of the stations in orbit are clearly damaged. They couldn’t get close enough to find out if some pieces of the debris belonged to the Jewel, but seeing as there wasn’t a ship matching the visual scans of the Jewel in the orbit, I would say that it is very likely that Jewel was destroyed.”

“Which means that our people are probably dead. Unless they were on the planet when it was destroyed,” Gotu said sadly. He hadn’t known Sentinel Aileen very well, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t feel sorrow.

“Probably. The Erasi are regulating traffic through the system; it appears that no ships are allowed to leave it. With the hyperspace communication still impossible, it’s probable that they do not wish us to learn of what happened. They probably don’t know that we have allies on the planet, but they must assume that some of our trading partners would let us know what had happened,” Johanna said. “As for the possibility that some of our people are still alive, it is slim.”

Gotu thought about it for a while before speaking. “The fact that all communications are blocked can’t be a coincidence; they must be jamming communications actively. And it could be that they are afraid of someone letting us know; the Erasi must be aware that as soon as we learned what happened, we would put all our resources at disposal to Shara Daim,” Gotu added. Then after a moment of silence, he looked back at the hologram. “But it could be that some of our people are alive and they don’t want to risk them getting a message out.”

“It’s possible, but there is nothing that we can do until we know for certain. Tarabat is too well defended for my single fleet to take, and all of our other forces are tied up elsewhere. Any rescue mission would need to be a stealth one, a small team. But without knowing if they were alive and where, it’s impossible to plan for anything,” Fleet Commander said.

“You are right, of course. If some of our people are alive, they will need to send a message before we can act.” Gotu brought his arms in front of his chest in a gesture of gratitude. “Thank you, Fleet Commander. I assume that you have already sent a report to Fleet Headquarters?”

“I did,” Johanna answered. “My scout ship will remain in Tarabat to monitor the situation. If there is any further development, I will let you know.”

“Thank you again, Fleet Commander,” Gotu said.

Fleet Commander Johanna Stern nodded firmly and closed the connection. Gotu sighed and stood. He needed to send a message to Adrian letting him know that the negotiations with the Erasi were now over. Which would mean that his fleets would be free to join the Shara Daim and engage the Erasi forces. Not many in the Empire had truly believed that the Erasi would accept a diplomatic solution; most of them had expected war. And yet, Gotu had never imagined that the Erasi would stoop to actually attacking the diplomatic team from the Empire.

He knew that Aileen had been given instruction to give the Erasi an ultimatum: they were to commit to finding a diplomatic solution, or the Empire would sever all ties and go to war fully. However, he’d never imagined that they would kill them in order to get more time. Gotu shook his head and started recording a message for the Lord Sentinel. Adrian needed to know about Tarabat as soon as possible.

Interlude II

A long time ago

Axull Darr, his twin Ullax Darr, and their close friend Waiss Gast sat on board the exploratory vessel Star Hope, reviewing all the data from the beginning of their observation of the alien potentially intelligent lifeform—which they had named Alphas. They had been at it for a long time. Over six thousand years of observations were compiled in the raw data in front of them, and this was the sixth month of their review.

"There is nothing here!" Ullax said, frustrated. "You were wrong, Waiss, Alphas are not a stage three lifeform."

"They must be," Waiss insisted. "They exhibit all the characteristics of what we believe a stage three needs to have. They live in communities, they care for their young, they use tools, and have limbs suitable for executing complicated tasks."

"Pah!" Ullax exclaimed. "A beast can use things in its environment as a tool if it discovers that it is useful. And there are beasts that live in communities and care for their young."

"Yes, but none have limbs suitable for more advanced tasks!" Waiss responded.

"That means nothing! They haven't advanced at all since we started watching them, not one recorded instance of innovation, of a new use for a tool or even a slight improvement of the same!" Ullax stood up. "Admit it, you were wrong."

"We should give them more time," Waiss pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Waiss, but I have wasted enough time on your project," Ullax said, and left the room, leaving Waiss following her with his gaze.

"I know that she is probably right," Waiss said, his eyes still on the door through which Ullax had left. "If only I could figure out why no other life has shown signs of higher intelligence, I feel like she would look at me differently."

Axull sighed. He knew how his friend felt about his sister, but there was nothing he could do. Ullax was brilliant, the best in her fields; her automatons and machinery were revolutionary. But her brilliance also made her disregard anyone that was less than that. It was her biggest flaw; she expected all to be equal to her, and when they fell inevitably short, they slipped beneath her notice.

"We don't know that she is right for sure. They could still move beyond this phase," Axull tried to reassure his friend.

Waiss turned to look at him. "You were right the first time, they are an aberration. A stage two lifeform that uses tools, nothing more,"

Waiss said, defeated.

"Not necessarily…" Axull said slowly, trying to decide whether to share his thoughts with his friend.

"What do you mean?" Waiss asked.

"I have been doing some testing of my own," Axull responded hesitantly.

"What kind of testing?" Waiss asked confused.

"Here, look at this." Axull brought the data from his tests on the holographic display above their table.

Waiss leaned in and studied the data, then turned to look at Axull with a frown on his face. "This is a study on the Sha."

"Yes," Axull Darr said.

"What does it have to do with the Alphas' intelligence?" Waiss asked.

"Do you notice anything strange about the levels of Sha with the Alphas?" Axull asked.

"No, everything seems to be normal," Waiss responded unsurely.

"The levels are normal; right about in the middle of the scale of every lifeform that isn't us."

Waiss narrowed his eyes. "So there is nothing strange about them. What is the purpose of this, Axull?"

"This here is a scan of the Sha level of a newborn of the People," Axull said as he put the new data alongside the first.

Waiss took only a short glance at the new data before he turned to look at Axull. "This is nothing new, of course there is a discrepancy. We are far more attuned to the Sha; we can influence it, they can't. Sha permeates through them, but it isn't gathered in them; they have no conduit nor the biology necessary to achieve that."

"Exactly," Axull said with a smile.

"And what does that mean?"

"Do you know when our people achieved a connection with the Sha?" Axull asked.

"Well we don't really know. Based on the remains, historians believe that it was just about the time we started living in larger groups and using tools." Waiss said.

"You are half right. That period was when we supposedly achieved conscious ability to manipulate the Sha. But, most biologists agree that we had evolved a conduit to the Sha much earlier in our evolution."

"And what does that have to do with the Alphas and their intelligence?"

"They don't have a conduit; they can't even feel the Sha around them."

Waiss opened his mouth to say something, then stopped himself

and looked at Axull for what seemed hours before he spoke again. “You think that the Sha has a direct correlation to intelligence.”

“It makes sense,” Axull Darr said slowly. “There is no other lifeform in the galaxy that has our ability, none that can even interact with the Sha within them on an unconscious level. We are the only ones, and we have attained higher intelligence. It is an avenue worth exploring.”

“If that is true, then the Alphas will never be intelligent, or at least not for a long time,” Waiss said, defeated.

“No, not unless we help them along,” Axull said.

“What do you mean?”

“We could alter them slightly, give them a conduit,” Axull responded.

“I doubt that the Grand Exatts would approve of that,” Waiss said slowly, but even as he did, Axull could see that his friend was interested.

“You are in charge of this project and can do whatever you want. We could change only a small number of them, monitor them for a couple of generations and see if it sparks anything. If nothing happens, it will be easy to remove any alterations we do. And if it does succeed, we would have answered the question the People had sought an answer to since we started exploring the stars. The Grand Exatts will be ecstatic,” Axull said.

“Yes,” Waiss said, almost to himself. “Can you imagine it, Axull?” Waiss looked at his friend. “If it turns out that Sha is required to spark higher intelligence, we could spark life across the galaxy with just one small alteration!”

Axull smiled at his friend’s enthusiasm. “Yes, we wouldn’t be alone anymore. Imagine speaking with a lifeform that is not like you, who perceives the universe through senses different from yours. What kind of conversations would we have?”

“That will only happen if you are right,” Waiss said, his bright mood dimming a bit.

“Well, then, let’s get to work,” Axull said as he stood up. “Oh, and we better find Ullax before she packs up and leaves. I doubt that she will want to miss this.”

Waiss’s mood brightened again at the prospect of Axull’s sister remaining with them. And Axull couldn’t help but smile at the expression of hope and happiness on his friend’s face.

Chapter Seventeen

November; Year 58 of the Empire — Numvani — Bloodbringer

The Bloodbringer dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the system where the meeting with the Erasi was supposed to take place, and slowly Bloodbringer made its way towards the planet, all the while scanning everything around them.

They had detected a single Erasi ship on the opposite side of the system, and a super battleship moving towards the meeting place. Once they'd detected them and calculated their speed, Anessa had her people adjust their speed so both ships would reach the planet around the same time. Almost a day later, both ships were in orbit of the planet, with the Erasi ship and the Bloodbringer taking positions on opposite hemispheres.

"So far so good," Anessa heard Adrian say from behind her as she was putting on her Sentinel armor.

"There doesn't appear to be anything suspicious, no indication of a trap," Anessa said.

"Unless you count this whole thing," Adrian said cheerfully.

Anessa turned and glared down on him. "If you are so convinced that it is a trap, why are you even coming? Why did you tell me to accept?"

"Because as I said, we have no choice. The Empire needs to accept the talks because of our image, and you need to show other races that you are changing your ways and are willing to talk instead of just conquering and subduing anyone who isn't Shara Daim," Adrian said somberly.

Anessa grimaced without responding and took the last piece of the armor from Akash, who was holding it for her in his jaws, and put it on her right hand. With a thought, she triggered the armor and within moments it was fully deployed except for her head, which she left bare. Adrian did the same. Anessa walked over to the table, picked up the translator, and attached it to her temple. Then they walked out of the room and towards the Bloodbringer's landing bay with the two wolions following behind them.

The shuttle—one that had been upgraded with skim drives—that would take them to the small island was already ready, and a squad of four Va Sun led by Do Sun Arisak and four of the Empire's adepts, along with one of the Empire's Sowir, were waiting in front of the shuttle. The Sowir had made some of her people uncomfortable, but in the end they didn't complain much. Lurker of the Depths was there because Adrian wanted added security, as according to him the alien was the most powerful telepath in the Empire, and the one that had

trained and taught Adrian everything he knew. And after witnessing Adrian's fight a few months ago, she knew how powerful of a telepath he was.

"We are ready, Kar Daim," Do Sun Arisak said.

"Good, let's get this over with," Anessa said, and turned to look at Garaam, who was standing close by. **"Monitor the system. If anything happens that makes you suspect a trap, call the ground team and prepare to get us out,"** Anessa sent.

"Don't worry, I'll fly the Bloodbringer into the atmosphere if I have to. If the Erasi are planning something, they will regret it," Garaam responded.

With that, Anessa went inside and settled in the chair beside Adrian and the wolions, which had their own specially designed harnesses to strap in. Adrian had tried to get Akash and Sora to stay on the ship, but the two had other plans. They flew through the atmosphere for a while before the pilot finally reported that they were close and began landing. So far everything had gone according to plan; the Erasi shuttle had already arrived at the meeting spot but hadn't moved since.

Anessa felt the shuttle land, and as soon as she got the go-ahead from the pilot, she stood and started towards the exit ramp. Once the shuttle's ramp lowered, she stepped out into the harsh sunlight and dry air of the planet. She took a few steps forward over the rocky ground, making room for others to leave the shuttle behind her.

Adrian came to stand beside her, and they looked out towards the other side of the island. They were too far away to see the Erasi shuttle clearly, but it was visible. They were supposed to meet in the middle, between the two shuttles, and the Erasi had told them that they were meeting with two of their O'fa and that they could number two as well, which meant Adrian and Anessa would go alone. She wasn't worried about the two O'fa; she was confident in her skills and Adrian's, and they would be more than capable of dealing with anything.

She heard Adrian instruct the wolions to stay with the shuttle, and then some growls and whines as a response. But in the end, he managed to convince them that they would be able to see him at all times. Then together they started walking towards the meeting spot.

* * *

"It is them," Valanaru sent.

Garash turned to look at the Weaver. **"You are certain? We might be trying to trap them, but that doesn't mean that they**

can't try to trap us in return."

"I am certain," Valanaru sent as she lowered the viewing device from her eyes and retracted her mental tendrils back behind her shields. She was one of a very few telepaths capable of actually touching the mind of another telepath without them noticing. And she had touched the minds of the two coming towards them now. She didn't learn much, as both had their shields up, only that they were both very powerful, as powerful as what the Erasi believed Dai Sha—or rather, Kar Daim Anessa to be. That, coupled with the visual confirmation of their facial features, made her certain that it was exactly who they were waiting for.

"Good, let's get this done. I have a war to finish," Garash sent, and started walking towards them. Valanaru followed only a moment after.

* * *

Adrian studied the two figures coming towards Anessa and him. One was a Gatrey dressed in elaborate robe-like clothes, and judging by the height and the shape of the head, Adrian concluded that this Gatrey was a female. The other figure had four arms and two legs, and was clearly an Uvaramo, or rather Loraru, as they were calling themselves long ago. Their race was the one that had left the Union ship on Earth, which was then recovered by Olympus. The Uvaramo was male, and far larger than what the Empire's records suggested the Loraru should be. He was over a head taller than Adrian; not quite as tall as Anessa, but still much taller than he should have been. He wore a kind of battle armor that was green in tint with solid plates connected with black material over the joints and other places where a solid plate could inhibit movement.

The two stopped in front of Anessa and Adrian, and after only a moment of silence, the Uvaramo spoke. "I am very glad that you decided to accept our offer, Kar Daim, Lord Sentinel. I am O'fa Garash, and I serve as the Commander of the Erasi forces, as well as the ultimate authority in this sector of the Erasi." He gestured with one of his arms to the Gatrey at his side. "This is O'fa Valanaru, who is here in an advisory role."

"Why have you called for this meeting?" Anessa asked. "You've refused all diplomatic attempts by the Empire until now."

"The diplomats on Tarabat are low level; they were waiting for me to arrive in the sector. As to why we called for the meeting, it is simple. We want to end this war quickly," O'fa Garash said to Anessa, and took a step forward, spreading his arms wide. "You have had

some success leading the Shara Daim forces against us. You united your people under your rule, and that is complicating matters."

Anessa tilted her head. "You attacked us first, and with no provocation."

"We only acted as a preemptive measure. The practice of Shara Daim has been known to us for some time. It was only a question of when you would've turned against us," the O'fa said, and took another step forward.

Anessa grimaced. She knew that what the Erasi was saying was right. Adrian took his eyes of him and turned to look at the Gatrey, Valanaru, who was studying him. He narrowed his eyes. There was something strange about her, something on the edge of his consciousness that he could not quite grasp.

"I will not deny that," Anessa said, "but the Elders no longer rule the Shara Daim. I do. And under my rule, that will not happen."

"Sadly, the Erasi can't take that chance," the O'fa said as he crossed the halfway point to them. "And without you, the Shara Daim will give us much less resistance."

Adrian frowned and started turning his head to look at the Uvaramo when something in his mind clicked and he could feel both of the O'fa gathering Sha. "Watch out!" he yelled out, and just barely managed to trigger his armor to deploy his helm before a massive telepathic attack slammed into him, forcing him down to his knee.

* * *

Adrian's warning came a split second before the Uvaramo attacked; in an astonishing burst of speed, his two upper arms snapped upwards, sending a kinetic blast towards her, just as she jumped to the side to evade it. Triggering her armor to deploy the helmet mid-jump, she raised her arm and fired a kinetic blast while she was still in the air. It rippled from her arm towards the O'fa. With a wave of his hand, her attack disappeared, and both of his lower arms pointed towards her as weapons on his forearms deployed. A moment later, the weapons fired.

Anessa landed and had enough time to create a shield of force between herself and her attacker, catching the first bolt on the shield. All of it happened in barely a second, and before the second bolt struck, she was already moving to the side, triggering the weapon on her Sentinel armor. The second bolt struck her shield and was quickly followed by the third, and then the fourth one that broke her shield. The mini-turret deployed over her shoulder and opened fire, forcing the O'fa to momentarily stop his own attack and generate a shield to

stop it.

With some respite, Anessa glanced to where Adrian was kneeling and could feel him engaged in a mind battle with the Gatrey. That moment of carelessness almost killed her. The O'fa closed the distance between them in a blur of speed, and from near point-blank range, he fired his weapons at her torso. The only thing that saved her was the Sentinel armor, which was designed to withstand similar weapons fire. She attempted to raise a shield between them as she jumped backwards, bolts of weapons fire from her turret still firing and sizzling against the O'fa's shield that was somehow still standing. As soon as her shield started sliding into place, a wave of Sha burst from the O'fa, disrupting it, and a force grabbed her while still in the air and threw her to the side.

Anessa landed on her back and rolled several times before she managed to get her feet under her. She got up to her knees only to see the O'fa running towards her faster than she believed was possible. A familiar buildup of Sha and a gesture from the O'fa was her only warning, and she attempted to roll to the side as a small implosion sprung in place just behind where her head had been. An implosion couldn't be formed inside a being's body, but place it close enough and the force was strong enough to kill instantly. Anessa moved far enough to escape instant death, but her shoulder turret was ripped to pieces, and the force pulled her back towards its center. For a moment, she was suspended awkwardly in the air, and then the O'fa reached her. His two left fists slammed into her from above, throwing her to the ground with such force that she actually bounced back, just as his foot slammed on her stomach, pinning her to the ground.

His weapons started firing directly at her chest, over her heart, and warnings started showing up all over her HUD. Still dazed, she attempted to put a shield in place even as she tried to move her hands over her chest, but each time she tried to create a shield, the O'fa would disrupt it, and as soon as she had moved her hands, a force grabbed and pinned them to the ground.

She was burning power as fast as she could, trying to push the O'fa back, and failing. Her mental attacks encountered shields far more formidable than she had ever encountered before, and any counterattack she attempted was instantly countered by the O'fa and his overwhelming power. She had already expended more than half of her power trying to overcome her opponent, and couldn't see any way of escaping. The alerts on her HUD warned her that her armor wouldn't hold much longer, and once it failed, a single bolt of fire would end her life.

With no other choice, she triggered the command that would inject the NX-02 drug in her system. She felt a sharp pain as the

needles pierced her skin, and then almost immediately she felt power flood through her. With her energy supplies replenished, fire coursing through her veins, and every cell in her body bursting with power, she pulled, focusing as much power as she could into a single attack.

The O'fa paused his attack for just a moment, as he must've felt the drug's effects, and that single moment where his power slipped was enough. Anessa unleashed a kinetic blast around her, breaking the hold the O'fa had on her and sending him hurling through the air. She moved faster than she had ever moved before and got to her feet. The three slots on her forearm opened and three small black spheres floated in front of her. With a surge of power, she bent the Sha around them, sending them towards the O'fa so fast that they could barely be seen by eye alone, and Anessa ran towards her opponent behind them.

The first of the spheres struck the O'fa just as he landed on his feet, hitting him in the shoulder and denting his armor. The second sphere encountered a shield that the O'fa managed to slide in place incredibly fast, slamming into it and bouncing off to the side with most of its energy absorbed or deflected. The third sphere encountered the same shield, but it punched through—although robbed of most of its power—hitting the O'fa in the chest and throwing him off balance.

Anessa reached him before he could recover, and before he could put up another shield, she raised her arms and leveled them with his chest. Borrowing Adrian's move, she released a stream of plasma from both of her palms, scorching the O'fa's armor, and as he raised all four of his arms to protect his torso, the plasma burned his forearms, destroying his weapons in the process. Trying to conserve some of her energy, she stopped shooting plasma, and stepped closer to the O'fa. She raised her left hand and smashed it downwards on the O'fa's shoulder. The attack barely staggered the alien, and his hands flashed in a quick retaliation, hitting her in the chest. A blade dashed out of her forearm and Anessa swiped it towards the O'fa's head. The alien ducked away as a telekinetic force took hold of her blade arm and pushed it to towards the ground, impaling a third of the sword into the rock. Before Anessa had a chance to pull it out, the O'fa's foot came down hard on the blade, breaking it in half.

Then the O'fa retaliated. A kinetic blast picked Anessa off the ground and threw her backwards, and while she was still in the air, a force grabbed hold of her and threw her to the ground. Her head smashed into the rock hard enough that her vision went dark for a moment, stunning her. Then the O'fa was standing above her, his armor scorched and smoking, but still whole. Anessa reached out with her power, attempting to form an implosion just behind the O'fa's neck, trying to break it. Her attack never had the chance to form. The O'fa sprung forward, picking her up by the neck and taking a few

steps forward before he slammed her against a small boulder.

Her hands were forced apart and held by force that she couldn't overcome, and fists pummeled her head against the rock so hard that for a moment she lost consciousness. In a desperate attempt to get free, she opened her mind and sent a mental attack, but the O'fa's defenses were too strong, and she was too weak. As her body was restrained with the O'fa's power, Anessa could do nothing. Her head was spinning, and all she could do was watch as the O'fa raised his upper right hand, extending all of his fingers and putting them together. A moment later, the air around them crackled and shimmered as a yellowish glow appeared around his fingers. Then the hand slammed down into her chest, slowly pushing through her already weakened armor. The O'fa started ripping pieces of her chest armor off, digging a hole in it, cutting and throwing pieces back as nanites in the armor tried to repair the damage unsuccessfully. Finally, she screamed as she felt the tips of his fingers cut into her chest as he ripped away the last piece of her armor.

He raised his hand for the final strike that would end her life. "You should be proud," the O'fa said. "I have not been pushed this far in a very long time. Rest assured, your people will be put in their rightful place."

Anessa looked at the O'fa with her vision darkening, meeting her death head on. Then, just as the hand started its path towards her heart, terror unlike anything she had ever felt gripped her. It lasted for only a fraction of a second as it brushed against her, and Anessa recognized what it was. The O'fa's hand shook, and he stood up and walked several steps backwards as he was gripped by sheer emotion. His hold on her slipped, and Anessa saw his body shake as he was stepping away from her, his head looking up at something behind her. Then a wave of Sha burst from him, disrupting the attack. His body slumped for a moment, and then turned upwards in surprise, just as a massive streak of blue fur flew over Anessa and collided with the O'fa.

* * *

Adrian's mind was on fire. The Gatrey had caught him by surprise; her attack had smashed into his defenses and was pushing through. Each time he tried to launch a counterattack, she would take down another one of his defenses. But he still held on. Several times she had tried to unleash an attack inside his mind that he was pretty sure would've killed him, but every time he had managed to thwart her attacks.

"You are strong," a voice resonated inside his head. **"Far**

stronger than I assumed you would be."

Adrian didn't dare answer; he kept all of his focus on countering the breaches inside his mind. She was powerful, more powerful than anyone he had ever encountered, including perhaps even Lurker of the Depths.

"You must know that I am far stronger; you have no hope of winning against me," she sent, her words reverberating through his head. **"Already Garash is finishing off the Kar Daim. She was strong, I must admit, but not even she could have stood against the Son of Carnage,"** she sent. Adrian was very much aware of what she was doing. Mind battle was more than a simple strength match. She was using psychological attacks, trying to get him to give up. Too bad for her that he could feel Anessa and the other O'fa still fighting. **"Soon he will come and kill your body. Why fight me, when your fate is inevitable?"**

Adrian tuned her words out, compartmentalizing and devising ways of countering her attempts to pierce his defenses. Her attacks were powerful and perfect, no weaknesses for him to exploit, no room for him to send out an attack of his own. There was only one thing he could do, but it carried an incredible risk. He would need to be faster than her, or he would die.

Composing himself, he did one thing that he was certain she did not expect—he collapsed his outer defenses. Suddenly the targets of the Gatrey's attacks disappeared; all the memories that he hadn't put inside his inner walls, inside his construct, were vulnerable to the Gatrey. And in that moment of confusion, he struck. He reached out to the Gatrey's mind and with all of his power pulled her inside his mind, inside his construct, to a place where he was most powerful.

Suddenly the two of them were inside the central chamber of his construct, surrounded by the gray walls of the cave. The tunnels leading to other areas of his construct were closed, leaving only the central cave. Adrian saw the Gatrey's surprise, and struck before she had the chance to recover. He unleashed an attack on her mind, which manifested inside his construct as spikes that sprung from the rock floor to impale the Gatrey's avatar from the floor.

"I'm impressed," said the Gatrey's avatar as she shimmered and stepped out of the spikes, seemingly unhurt. **"You are a mindbender; I did not anticipate this."** She looked at him askance. **"You have a large true-mind. A cave inside of a mountain. Simplistic, yet massive and powerful."**

She took a few steps forward and Adrian attacked again. More spikes sprung from the rock floor, impaling her once more. She stopped for a moment; her face showed sign of strain and discomfort, and then she shimmered again and stepped out of the spikes for the

second time. **“Very powerful, but I have fought against many mindbenders over many millennia. You cannot defeat me,”** the Gatrey said, almost sadly, as she sent an attack of her own which manifested as chunks of rocks flying toward Adrian’s head.

“Why are you doing this?” Adrian demanded, as he deflected the rocks with his mind. **“We could’ve had peace, and now no matter the outcome of this trap, you will have only war.”**

“It is simple; it is in the nature of the strong to seek domination. We have learned these lessons a long time ago. Better that we stop any who have potential to threaten us while we are superior.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that. We can still have peace, a cooperation of equals,” Adrian said.

“You are young and naïve. Equality among those of different opinions and goals is impossible. Eventually one swallows the other; it is the law of nature.”

Adrian could see that he wouldn’t convince her, and she was more powerful and more experienced, he could feel that. Focusing, Adrian forced his mind to work faster, bringing his entire construct into his mindspace as he kept a tight hold on the intruder in his mind. Telepaths inherently could perceive and process information faster; their brains could for short periods of time speed up. But Adrian’s mindspace was something on a completely different level. While a telepath could experience minutes as hours, Adrian could experience minutes as days. Nothing in the construct changed, but Adrian could see that the Gatrey had noticed a difference.

“What… are… you… doing…?” she said slowly, every word spread out, her face contorted in pain.

“You are in my head now, and you might be powerful, but your brain back in your body can’t keep up with mine,” Adrian said as he started attacking her.

Spikes from the ground pierced her, and rocks pummeled her as Adrian kept her mind locked deep inside his own. He knew that he was hurting her, because she was trying to escape. Adrian was keeping her mind tight inside his construct, and with the mindspace straining her brain by forcing her to experience everything much faster than she was used to, she couldn’t even mount a defense.

Then as Adrian knew she was nearing her limit, she roared and a screech pierced through his mind, forcing his avatar to the knees. A large rock appeared and smashed into Adrian from the side, and he lost focus—and in the process lost his mindspace. His construct lurched and the walls shook as time changed speed.

Adrian rose from the floor, and from a kneeling position looked at the Gatrey, her avatar form now battered and wounded, but standing

and walking towards him. **“I thank you,”** she said honestly, as her attacks still pierced his mind, filling it with a painful screech. **“I have forgotten what it feels like to be so close to death, to have my power challenged by an equal. So before I kill you, I will bestow upon you the greatest honor one telepath can give to another. I name you, Heart of the Mountain.”**

Her hands rose, preparing for the final blow. Adrian was close to his limit, his power expended and his mind injured; he had nothing left to defend himself. Then, he felt a presence, large and familiar, surround his mind, and Adrian lowered his shields to allow it in.

The Gatrey’s avatar flew backwards as invisible force threw her across the room. The Gatrey rose from the ground and looked at Adrian, and the newcomer standing beside him.

Lurker of the Depths stood inside Adrian’s construct, his power blanketing Adrian’s. **“Kar Daim needs your help. Go, I will deal with this,”** Lurker of the Depths sent him in private, and then his power grabbed hold of the Gatrey, allowing Adrian room inside his mind.

“Thank you,” Adrian said, and with one last look at the Gatrey, together Lurker of the Depths and Adrian pushed her out of his construct and mind.

* * *

Lurker of the Depths felt Adrian’s mind detach itself from the Erasi attacker, and without waiting, he turned on the mind that he had a tentative hold of, sending tendrils of his mind to bore into her defenses. He was struggling, and straining himself by stretching his mind from the shuttle to the meeting place; he was at the very edge of his range, and couldn’t bring to bear all of his mind’s power without extending himself too far and breaking his mind. That meant he couldn’t do what Adrian had done and bring the Erasi into his construct, but he could still hold her at bay. Her mind was exhausted from the fight with Adrian, but still Lurker of the Depths could feel considerable strength from her. His attacks encountered her defenses, and started boring holes that were already there from Adrian’s attacks, but each time he focused on a single point, she would reach over great distance to strike back at him.

“Another surprise. You too are a mindbender,” the Erasi sent. **“And even more impressive, that you are able to reach out and hold me from such a distance.”**

Lurker of the Depths ignored her, and reinforced his attacks.

“It is useless,” she said. **“You are very powerful, but we are**

too far from each other to do any real damage. The only thing you have accomplished is to change the human's executioner. Garash will kill him easily enough."

"You underestimate my former student," Lurker of the Depths sent, as he felt and thwarted the Erasi's attempt to slip his hold.

"I see… you are his teacher. His technique does feel like yours," the Erasi sent, trying to distract him as her counterattack lashed out and disappeared harmlessly against his defenses. **"Perhaps you should release me and help him; you might be able to save him from certain death."**

"Adrian needs not my aid," Lurker of the Depths sent. Slowly, he felt his grip on the Erasi's mind slipping. She was powerful, and he was too far away to throw all of his strength at her.

"It does not matter. Either Garash kills him, or I will finish what I started once I am free of your hold. You must feel it; I will be free of you soon."

Lurker of the Depths knew that she was right. However, he was the most powerful telepath of the Sowir for a reason. **"What is your name?"** Lurker of the Depths asked, distracting the Erasi as he prepared his final attack.

Surprise passed through the Erasi's mind, and after a moment, she answered, **"I am known as the Weaver."**

Finished with his preparations, Lurker of the Depths stopped his mind tendrils from attacking. **"I am Lurker of the Depths, of the Sowir,"** he sent, along with a feeling of his home's oceans and the deep dark of their depths. **"Allow me to give you a gift, to always remember me by."**

With all the power that he could muster and send across such distance, Lurker of the Depths abandoned his attacks and opened his defenses, sending one large message, ramming it inside the Erasi's mind. The Sowir were a race more connected through the Sha and their minds than any other in the Empire. They shared emotion, thoughts, and experiences constantly, craving the comfort of other minds, supporting one another.

His message was a thing that only a Sowir could craft, and only a Sowir could understand and bear. The combined feelings of the Sowir race, the horror of their actions against the other intelligent races, the realization that all they had done was wrong, that their beliefs were wrong. The dying ripples of Sowir who had killed themselves from shame and disgust, the feelings of all the other Sowir on his homeworld who had continued living bearing all that horror. The pain of a race as its foundations crumbled.

Lurker of the Depths' mind pulled back as he felt the Erasi's mind receive the message, and feel pain that no one being was ever

supposed to bear alone.

* * *

Adrian opened his eyes and looked at the form of the Gatrey slumped in concentration. He turned and saw Anessa propped against a small boulder and the other O'fa standing above her ripping away pieces of her armor. For a moment, he debated finishing the Gatrey first, but Anessa was in trouble, and tiredly he tried to stand and almost fell over from exhaustion. His body was still fresh, but his mind was tired and his energy levels were low. With his imp, he triggered the NX-02 release, and started running as the drug filled his system, giving him some of his strength back.

"Tell the shuttle pilot to be ready for liftoff!" Adrian told Iris through his imp, not waiting for her response.

He ran towards Anessa as the O'fa pulled the last piece of her armor off and raised his glowing hand for the final blow. He tried to reach out with his mind, but it was still recovering from his battle with the Gatrey, and he was too far to reach out with any other Sha ability. He was going to be too late. Time slowed down and he watched helplessly as the Erasi's hand descended towards Anessa's heart. His mind went into overdrive as he tried to find a way to prevent what was happening. He couldn't let this happen, he couldn't lose another, not again. Then, miraculously, the hand stopped, and a moment later a wave of terror brushed by Adrian. Immediately he recognized the signature. Turning his head, he spotted two blue forms running towards Anessa—Akash in the lead, with Sora a couple meters behind him. In a split second, Akash crossed the distance, just as the O'fa realized and nullified the wolions' emotional attack.

Adrian ran as the O'fa regained his faculties, and Adrian's heart broke as Akash pounced on the Erasi. A scream escaped his throat as the O'fa's hand pierced through Akash's flesh even as he was taken to the ground by the wolion's weight.

Adrian's mind went white as the O'fa pushed Akash off him, throwing him to the side and pulling his arm out of the wolion's chest. Adrian felt Akash die, and with him a part of Adrian died as well. Suddenly a hole appeared in a part of him that he hadn't even knew existed. Pain and rage filled him, and he ran towards his enemy. Color seeped out of his world, and everything unimportant disappeared; only the Erasi remained. Adrian launched a mental attack against the O'fa, but his strength was a pale shadow of what it could be; his mind still too tired. His attack disappeared against the O'fa's defenses, but by then, Adrian had reached him. The O'fa, warned by Adrian's

mental attack, sent a kinetic blast towards him, but Adrian didn't even slow as he threw a blast of his own, one that consumed and overpowered that of the O'fa, hitting him in the chest and staggering him.

Adrian reached the O'fa and his right fist slammed into his head, throwing him backwards. The O'fa tried to retaliate, his movements fast, sure, and practiced, but to Adrian, they might as well have been thrown by a child. He danced out of the way, his hands deflecting all four of the O'fa's arms. Adrian slapped one of the O'fa's hands, and raised his other as a stream of plasma left it to land all over the O'fa's helmet, scorching it. Sha built up between them as the O'fa threw a shield that deflected the plasma, and then stepped back out of Adrian's range. But Adrian was focused. He reached out with his telekinesis and pulled the O'fa back towards him.

Sha bent as Adrian bound all of the O'fa's arms to his body for a fraction of a moment. The O'fa quickly destroyed Adrian's binding, but by then Adrian had stepped close, reaching around the O'fa and trapping his arms against his own body. Adrian clasped his hands behind the O'fa, and with his imp triggered the command. The turret rose above his shoulder and fired point blank at the O'fa's helmet.

Bolts of fire washed over the O'fa's head. Sparks flew out and struck Adrian, but he didn't care. The O'fa grabbed hold of the Sha, and Adrian moved to counter, but the O'fa was more powerful. A force grabbed hold of Adrian's shoulder, ripping the turret to pieces and disrupting his hold. Another telekinetic tug made Adrian stagger backwards, and freed the O'fa completely. Adrian could see that freeing himself had cost the O'fa much of his remaining strength, and his helmet had layers peeled and scorched. The O'fa's entire armor was covered in battle damage, and Adrian moved to attack again. The three spheres left Adrian's forearm and flew towards the O'fa, one striking his head and the others making circular orbits around the O'fa to strike at his knees from behind. The disorienting strike to the head and the two on his knees forced the O'fa on his knees. Adrian stepped forward. His mono-blade slid from his forearm, and Adrian raised his hand for an attack.

But the O'fa was ready. He latched on to Adrian's hand, freezing it in the air. The fingers on his two upper arms started glowing in a yellowish light as he stood and stepped forward, aiming them towards Adrian's neck.

A blue shape came into Adrian's vision—Sora, her jaws grabbing hold of the O'fa's left lower arm. She pulled him to the side and off balance. Adrian's free hand flew forward, sending a kinetic blast towards the O'fa's shoulder and the hand that was coming down on Sora's head. The kinetic attack threw the O'fa off balance and

disrupted his hold on Adrian's other arm. As Adrian freed himself, the O'fa grabbed Sora telekinetically, dislodged her hold, picked her up, and then threw her behind Adrian.

That action gave Adrian enough time. His blade sang through the air in an upward motion. It met the O'fa's right upper hand, and in a single slash, it cut through the O'fa's forearm. The hand that had killed Adrian's friend, his family, dropped to the ground. The O'fa recoiled in pain and stepped back. Adrian followed, his blade flying through the air in a move that would pierce the O'fa's throat.

Something smashed into Adrian's shoulder, throwing him off, and his blade sliced through the O'fa's shoulder, making a shallow cut as he was thrown to the ground. Immediately Adrian stood, and was hit subsequently with two more blasts. He ignored them, pushing himself towards the now retreating O'fa. Another blast hit him in the chest, throwing him to the ground again, and dozens of alarms sprung onto his HUD. But Adrian was lost in his pain; he readied himself to charge.

Then his rage, his pain, dimmed, as if they were an old hurt. The world around him returned, at his side stood Sora, her eyes boring into him. She had dulled his emotions again, returned him from his rage. Adrian's eyes took in his surroundings; Erasi forces were running towards the O'fa. Three had already reached the Gatrey and were carrying her back, and from here Adrian could see that she was twitching uncontrollably as if in great pain. The other O'fa was running, holding his stump with one of his arms. The Erasi forces were firing at Adrian from the distance, just as fire returned from behind Adrian. Adrian's eyes landed on Akash, and he felt Sora nudge him to move. With a heavy heart, he did.

He turned and ran with Sora towards Anessa, who was struggling to get to her feet. He glanced back as a bolt whizzed by close to Sora, and saw that most of the Erasi troops didn't have full armor. He reached with the Sha to his three spheres on the ground, raising them in the air, and with an echo of his previous rage launched them at two of the closest Erasi, a Gatrey and a Ssarath. The spheres blasted their heads clean off in a shower of gore and blood, and the troops around them faltered.

Adrian reached Anessa just as one of her Va Sun did, and together they helped her up and half carried her to the shuttle, as she was clearly dazed. With his adepts and the Va Sun giving covering fire, they retreated and reached the shuttle. Inside, Adrian spotted Lurker of the Depths, already strapped in and obviously exhausted. Adrian helped Anessa strap in, and then moved towards the front of the shuttle.

"Get me a channel to the Bloodbringer, now!" Adrian ordered as the shuttle rose from the ground and started blasting towards the

orbit.

Chapter Eighteen

Numvani orbit — Bloodbringer

Dai Sha Garaam watched the holo in front of her as the shuttle carrying the Kar Daim landed on the planet. She was not as comfortable with them agreeing to the terms the Erasi set for opening a dialogue as Kar Daim had been, but she understood the reasons. The Shara Daim had a reputation among the other races, and one well deserved. This was all a part of them trying to change that perception. And Garaam knew that Anessa could take care of herself. She was a Dai Sha, and the Empire's Lord Sentinel, her Dal A'sha, was with her, and Garaam knew that he was powerful as well.

But that still didn't mean she didn't worry. She checked up on the Erasi super battleship on the holo and saw no change. It was still in the same orbit, its drives, weapons, and shields powered down, just like her own ship. The active scans of the Bloodbringer didn't report anything unusual; there was no other ship in close to the planet, nothing suspicious even. Garaam nodded to herself, satisfied, just as the Va Sun at the sensor terminal said, "Dai Sha, we are detecting strange readings from the planet."

"From the meeting place?" she asked, concerned.

"No, from the storm, Dai Sha."

Garaam frowned and brought up the information on c-board. The storm was massive, covering more than half of the planet, and its composition and charge made it hard to scan through. But the Bloodbringer's scanners had picked up some unusual readings. She switched to visual sensors and zoomed in. For a moment, there was only the storm, and then the clouds parted.

"Battle stations!" Garaam ordered. "Navigation, move us towards the shuttle's location, fast. Open a channel to the Legions."

Every Va Sun around her sprang into action, as shields came online a split second before the Erasi ships opened fire. Erasi energy weapons struck the shields. If Garaam or any one of her crew had been a second slower, they would have taken heavy damage. Two of the ships exiting the storm matched the visuals of the Erasi super battleships, but the third was unknown. It was larger, but as all three ships were still mostly inside the storm, she couldn't tell how much larger.

"Hyperspace communications are being jammed. Shuttle crew is reporting the meeting is a trap; the troops are moving to extract Kar Daim and the Lord Sentinel," the Va Sun from the comms reported.

Garaam's face contorted in anger. The Erasi had lain a trap for them.

“Dai Sha, the Erasi super battleship is moving towards us and the meeting place.”

Garaam glanced at the c-board and saw that her ship would be there first, but not by much. “Start priming the skim drives,” she ordered, then turned to the weapons terminal. “Load three salvos, standard missile loads, ten missiles each. Target that vessel and fire when ready. All main weapons target the largest of the Erasi vessels exiting the storm and fire when ready,” Garaam ordered.

Garaam watched the three ships as they were rising from the storm. Their shields were fluctuating, probably because of the storm, and they hadn’t fired missiles yet. The only reason that Garaam could think of as to why they didn’t was because they couldn’t; the storm must have been wreaking havoc on their systems. Three salvos of ten missiles each left the Bloodbringer on their way to the Erasi ship in orbit of the planet.

“Load another three standard loads, fifteen missiles each, target all three ships.”

Several second later, the Va Sun at the weapons spoke up. “Erasi vessels targeted, Dai Sha.”

“Fire,” Garaam said, and another three salvos launched, this time towards the three Erasi ships on the planet, which were much closer. The Erasi ships started shooting them down, but they still hadn’t left the storm’s effective range. Several missiles exploded against their shields, but a few passed through the fluctuation in their shields to explode against the hull, only about half of those missiles failed to detonate upon impact.

“Why didn’t they explode?” Garaam asked.

“It’s the storm, it is damaging the missiles’ sensors.”

Garaam grunted in displeasure as she watched her particle weapons strike against the three ships and their shields. The three ships were pouring as much fire as they could into Bloodbringer’s shields, but they were holding. The missiles that she had fired at the first Erasi warship were all taken down by their missile defense, and the warship fired a salvo of missiles in return.

“Channel from the shuttle, Dai Sha!”

Garaam immediately accepted on her c-board. “Garaam, what is the status in orbit?” she heard the voice of the Lord Sentinel ask.

“Three Erasi ships were hiding in the storm, two super battleships and an unknown. Is Kar Daim—is Anessa alright?”

“Damn, yes, we are… all on the shuttle. I would’ve skimmed the shuttle to orbit, but with you engaged in combat, we can’t risk the Bloodbringer losing its systems from the skim,” Adrian said. “You need to cover us, we will execute a combat landing.”

“I’m already moving towards you.”

“Good, see you in a bit,” he said, and closed the channel.

Garaam watched as the shuttle rose through the atmosphere, speeding towards her ship. The Bloodbringer slid in place to shield the shuttle as it approached, and took on the fire of the three ships, returning fire as best as it could. She didn’t worry about the first warship; it was behind the curvature of the planet and couldn’t fire directly, and its missiles would arrive after the shuttle had already landed.

“Load three salvos, high yield, programmed to fly wall formation towards the storm and explode four hundred meters from the Bloodbringer. Fire on my mark, and be ready to lower the shields for the shuttle’s landing,” Garaam ordered. “Contact the shuttle crew, warn them that we are about to move at full thrust. They need to compensate for our position.”

“Yes, Dai Sha.”

Garaam knew that the Erasi were aware that she would need to lower the shields in order for the shuttle to land, and she was certain that they were waiting for that moment.

“Salvos loaded, Dai Sha.”

Garaam watched the c-board, and the shuttle, waiting for the right moment.

“Fire missiles!” Garaam ordered. “Navigation, stand by for full thrust.”

The missiles exited the crossing space quickly, and just before they passed four hundred meters, Garaam shouted, “Engage full thrust!”

The missiles exploded, creating a curtain of fire inside the atmosphere of the planet, and obscuring the Bloodbringer from the Erasi ships’ targeting systems. The Bloodbringer lurched as its engines pushed it forward, and Garaam felt herself slam into her chair as the ship’s dampeners fought to keep up with the sudden thrust.

The shuttle approached, and the Bloodbringer’s shields went down, allowing it to pass. Erasi fire struck through the curtain, most of it missing but some striking the back end of her ship.

“Impact! Hull breach in section three, decks seven and eight. Shields are back online. The shuttle has landed,” a Va Sun reported.

“Turn us towards open space, be ready to skim to hyperspace border on my signal!” Garaam ordered. Their shields were starting to drop below fifty percent, and Garaam knew that they couldn’t take much more of this.

As her ship was turning and trying to get away from the planet, the curtain cleared, and Garaam glanced at her c-board, seeing two of the Erasi super battleships fully out of the storm, but the third ship was still in it, and already what she could see it was much larger than

any of the Erasi super battleships.

“Energy buildup from the unknown Erasi warship!” a Va Sun reported.

Before Garaam could ask for an elaboration, the Bloodbringer shook, and lights in the room dimmed and fluctuated.

“Hull breaches, sections four, five, and six, decks nine through fifteen and seventeen through twenty-one!”

“What was that?” Garaam asked, as she saw that their shields were still online and at forty percent.

“Unknown, Dai Sha! The energy weapon passed clear through our shields!”

“Are the skim drives ready?” Garaam asked. She looked at the visual sensors and saw the massive Erasi ship. Two turrets were now visible as they just left the storm—the weapons that had just hit her ship.

“Fifteen more seconds, Dai Sha.”

“Target every weapon on that ship!” Garaam ordered, and all of Bloodbringer’s fire switched to attack the massive Erasi warship.

“Energy buildup from the Erasi ship!” Garaam glanced at the visuals and saw light emanating from the two turrets.

“Skim us when ready!”

“Skim in three, two, one! Skimming!”

The Bloodbringer entered the skim, and Garaam released a sigh of relief as they managed to get away in time.

“Get us to the Legions. Engage hyperspace when ready.”

Chapter Nineteen

Three days later — November; Year 58 of the Empire — Erasi Devastator End of Hope — Numvani orbit

Garash looked at the recording of the fight in the Numvani orbit, trying to see if there was anything that he would've done differently. He had nearly killed the commander of his ship when he'd learned that the Shara Daim warship had escaped; the only reason he hadn't was because he wasn't in any shape to do so. He cursed himself for giving Weaver Hanaru all of his stealth ships; if he'd had even one near the Shara Daim warship, he could've destroyed it before it entered FTL. He glanced at the stump of his hand, covered in healing gel that would close the wound. He could've started the process of having the hand regrown, but doing so would require him to be put to sleep for the duration of the procedure, and he couldn't do that now.

Seeing the stump brought another bout of anger to the surface. He had been defeated, had actually been in the danger of losing his life. He glanced at Valanaru, who was standing across the table from him.0 The plan to take out the Shara Daim and the Empire's leaders was hers, and it had failed spectacularly. The only reason Garash hadn't turned on her was because he'd agreed to the plan, and because Valanaru had left the planet as injured as he. Garash could see that her fight with the Human had taken a great toll on her, a thing that he hadn't believed possible, yet it was clearly visible. She looked sickly, unnerved, and every once in a while, he could see her body twitch uncontrollably. And the only answer Garash had received from her concerning her battle was her telling him that the Human had been a mindbender, a thing that he hadn't even considered possible. None of the information they had gathered about the Empire suggested such level of power in any of the three categories.

"How did we not know that the Shara Daim had the Empire's FTL technology?" Garash asked angrily. The fact that the Shara Daim possessed the FTL technology of the Empire was the only reason why they had managed to escape. "Your Weavers assured me—*you* assured me that they did not possess it."

"I have read the agreement of alliance between the Shara Daim and the Empire," Valanaru said, slowly, as if she had trouble finding the words. "The agreement clearly states that the Empire will not share their FTL technology with the Shara Daim."

Garash grunted, "Yet they obviously did. Your Weavers should have known."

"You understand nothing of how spying truly works, nor do you understand the difficulty that the Shara Daim present. They are near

impossible to turn, and we can't insert our agent anywhere without them standing out. We must rely on pieces of communications we manage to get."

"And we were wrong about their strength," Garash said harshly.

"We underestimated them; there was nothing to indicate that the Empire had mindbender-level telepaths," Valanaru said.

"Both the Kar Daim and the Lord Sentinel were far stronger than what we had believed them to be. I almost died."

"As did I," Valanaru added.

"I should've never allowed you to convince me to use Weaver tactics," Garash said, looking at his stump again. He was barely containing his anger. "There will be no more of that. As soon as we get back to the fleet, I am taking it straight into Shara Daim territory."

"We underestimated them once, Garash. Do not do so again," Valanaru cautioned.

"They surprised us," Garash said. "And even if the Shara Daim have the FTL technology, they couldn't have had the time to retrofit all of their ships. We must strike now, before they do so."

"There are things that I haven't shared with you yet. Things that I learned about them from the Human's mind during our battle."

"What did you learn?" Garash asked.

"Nothing that would give you an advantage. The things that I learned were only bits and pieces from his unprotected surface memories, things that only raise more questions," Valanaru said. "The Shara Daim and the Humans are more connected than we realized; they are the same people."

"How do you mean? Our scientists said that they are similar, but that even genetically they are different species."

Valanaru's hand twitched, and she closed her eyes for a moment. "According to what I got from his mind, there are three races, the Shara Daim, Humans, and Nel, who are actually descended from the same race. I did not have the time to learn how that thing was possible, but I did a few other pieces. This ancestor race was called the People, and as far as the Human believed, they were the first intelligent race in the galaxy."

"The People…" Garash said, intrigued. That was something that interested him. He had been trying to figure out the patterns of the galaxy, and in that search he had come across mentions of an old race, far more advanced than anyone else, who had disappeared from the galaxy a long time ago. "Did you learn anything else?" he asked.

"Nothing of consequence. A few more bits, memories of his life, images of worlds, pieces of conversations—nothing that would aid you in this conflict."

"You could show me those memories and I could see for myself,"

Garash said.

Valanaru visibly shook. “No, that wouldn’t be wise. Trust me on this, Garash, you don’t want to be anywhere near my mind right now.”

“What happened to you down there?”

“I suffered an attack unlike any I have ever experienced. And I am still fighting off its effects; it is taking all that I have to keep my mind whole, and myself sane,” Valanaru said.

Garash looked at her in surprise. The Valanaru that he knew would have never admitted weakness, would have never given let him see her in such a vulnerable state. He looked at his stump, reminding himself that he too had lost something on that planet. “We lost the first battle, but the next one will be fought aboard warships. We shall see how they fare against our fleet,” Garash said, determined to see the Shara Daim and the Empire suffer for the insult and defeat they had brought him.

Chapter Twenty

Eight days later — November; Year 58 of the Empire — Bloodbringer

The shuttle landed gently on the massive Sowir construction ship, and Adrian stepped off as soon as the ramp lowered. Lurker of the Depths met him, and together they walked over to Lurker of the Depths' office.

"How many more did you manage to make?" Adrian asked.

"Another four thousand."

"That brings the number to five thousand and one hundred…" Adrian shook his head in dissatisfaction. **"That's not enough, nowhere near enough."**

"We've been focusing on defense platforms," Lurker of the Depths sent.

"I know… I need you to do something else for me. How many missile pods do you think you can equip with skim drives in two days?"

Lurker of the Depths remained silent for a moment, thinking. **"Two hundred, maybe, if we halt all other manufacturing."**

"Do it."

"What are you planning, Adrian?"

"I plan on showing the Erasi just how big of a mistake they made when they decided to go to war with us."

* * *

A few hours later, Adrian sat at the edge of Anessa's bed and watched her sleep. On Numvani, he had learned just how important she was to him. He had known in the moment that he wouldn't be fast enough to save her; he'd been convinced that he would watch another loved one die because he wasn't good enough. And it was his fault. He'd insisted that they needed to meet with the Erasi; he'd thought that they would want to discuss peace, even though he was aware of the force they had brought.

"You really love her, huh?" Iris asked.

"I believe so. Yes."

"Well, she's not that bad, I guess, for a tyrant," Iris said.

"I could've lost her, if Akash hadn't been there… And because of me he's gone."

"Akash loved you. More than any other person around you, the wolions understood you. Both of them knew your emotions as intimately as they knew their own. Perhaps he knew you even better than you yourself

did. He did what he did to spare you the pain you felt once before."

"It was my fault," Adrian said.

He was wrong, and Akash had paid the price. The wolion had died saving Anessa's life, and Adrian had lost someone who had been a part of his life, a constant presence. Adrian looked at Anessa's chest rising and falling, and Sora's head with it. She was sleeping on the bed with Anessa, both resting from their injuries at the medical facility on Kaleras. Anessa had suffered a concussion, but with quick treatment, she was already recovering and should be back to full strength by tomorrow. Sora was emotionally drained. Adrian could feel her sorrow, in times when she let it spill through.

Slowly, Adrian felt Anessa return to consciousness. Her eyes opened and locked with his. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Like my head was smashed against rocks, repeatedly," she answered drowsily. "How long was I asleep?"

"Eight days."

"What happened? Where are we?"

"We are in the Kaleras system. What do you remember?"

"I remember fighting the Erasi O'fa," Anessa said. "He was strong, the strongest I have ever fought against. I couldn't defeat him, and then I remember using the drug. I freed myself and was fighting back, and then… It's fuzzy…" she said. She noticed Sora and her eyes narrowed. She put her hand on Sora's head and gently petted her. "Akash?"

"He died," Adrian said sorrowfully.

"He saved my life…" Anessa said, and Adrian could see her hurting. "Before I met you, I would've never believed that someone could get so attached to what I thought were such simple beasts." She shook her head, composing herself. "I can't remember anything after that."

"While you were fighting, I was engaged in a mental battle with the other O'fa. With help from Lurker of the Depths, we managed to defeat her, then I turned to help you. I fought the Erasi fighting you. I cut off his hand, and they retreated. We went back to the shuttle and back to the Bloodbringer. The Erasi tried to trap us; they had three ships hidden in the atmosphere of the planet, inside the storm. Two super battleships and the large ship we detected with their fleet. If the Bloodbringer hadn't been retrofitted, didn't have the skim drives… we would've been dead," Adrian told her. "You were right, they never wanted peace."

"I'm sorry, Adrian," Anessa said, and he could see that she was. She had never believed that the Erasi would make peace, but she had allowed herself to be swayed by his opinions. The Empire's policy was always to seek a peaceful resolution. And a great part of why they

were pushing for that was because of past actions. The wars against the Sowir, the Ra'a'zani, the Furvor, even against the Shara Daim had not been handled well in Tomas's opinion. And with the galaxy opening up, with them meeting more and more alien races, he had wanted to establish a more understanding policy.

"You shouldn't be sorry. The Empire should apologize; you have honored your part of the deal, even when doing so went against your beliefs. You have shown that you are truly willing to change. Now, it is time for the Empire to honor its part of the deal," Adrian said.

"The Erasi fleet will move," Anessa said, "and they will certainly move against a hub system. And the closest one is here, Kaleras. We need to prepare for the defense of the system."

"They outnumber us more than two to one. Any attempt to defend this system will finish with our loss."

"I will not retreat. I will not let them take one more system," Anessa said with a determined expression. "Our ships are better than theirs, my commanders are skilled. We have fortified the system with defense platforms; we can win."

Adrian closed his eyes and sighed. "That was true until now. The three ships that ambushed the Bloodbringer were from this new fleet. They look the same as the ships your Legion fought until now, but they are better. The scans and records that the Bloodbringer took indicate that their energy weapons are twenty percent more powerful than what their previous ships used. Their shields are more powerful as well, although because of the storm, we are not sure how much of an increase they have, but it is at least fifteen percent. That new class of warship, which is far larger than anything you have seen from the Erasi, fired a weapon that went clear through the Bloodbringer's shields, completely ignoring them. And that is only the things that we know about."

Anessa's expression turned sour. "So you want me to pull back, abandon systems and my people to the Erasi? There are two hundred million people living in Kaleras. We don't have enough ships to even attempt to evacuate them all."

"That would be a smart, ruthless way that would give you a greater chance of eventual victory. If you buy time for all of your Legions to be retrofitted with skim drives, you would have a better chance," Adrian said. He saw her half rise from the bed in anger, but he pushed her back with one hand and continued speaking before she could say anything. "But no. I understand you and the Shara Daim well enough to know that doing that would be unimaginable for you. So I will do everything I can to help you win." He smiled down at her. "My fleets are ready; in two hours, we will be leaving."

"Leaving to where?" she asked suspiciously.

“As I said, it is time for the Empire to honor its part of the deal. I am going to attack their fleet,” Adrian said.

“You just told me that you don’t believe we can defeat them when they come, and you think that your twelve fleets can?” Anessa asked incredulously.

“Of course not,” Adrian said, “but I can hurt them. Reduce their numbers, before they come here.”

“With twelve fleets?” Anessa was on the verge of laughing. “The only thing you will accomplish is get your people killed.”

Adrian looked at her for a moment. She, of course, didn’t believe that he could accomplish anything. Even though the Empire and Shara Daim had an alliance and had shared many technologies, the Empire hadn’t shared any of their weapon systems other than the defense platforms, which used almost the same weapon systems as the Shara Daim. And what Anessa had witnessed in Sol was not everything in their arsenal. There, Adrian had used weapons suited for that situation, but in truth, not even one of the Empire’s true warships had engaged in combat, only drones. “It always seemed so strange to us,” Adrian told her, “that the war technology of all the races we have encountered since we left our homeworld seemed so… limited. Even now, when we have encountered you and the Erasi. Your technology is advanced, but the way you implement it is uninspired, you don’t try to find new and better ways to overcome your enemies. You rely on power.”

Anessa’s expression darkened, but Adrian didn’t let her speak, raising his hand to forestall her response.

“I do not say this to insult you, to diminish your achievements. But almost nothing we have seen from the more advanced races had actually been new to us, a weapon that we have never encountered or imagined. The only ones that had something that was new to us were the Ra’a’zani. You yourself have seen this; you had difficulties defeating them, not as fast as you should have, at least. They were inferior to you, yet they had prevailed, because they had weapons systems that you had never encountered before. And they used them in ways that you hadn’t seen before; they knew how to fight wars.”

Anessa remained silent, and Adrian could see in her eyes that she knew that he had spoken the truth, so he continued. “Both your and the Erasi weapons technology is based on the same things. Your ships use particle beams as your main weapons, lasers for point defense, and missiles as secondary weapons. The differences are minimal, and in nuances. We have always wondered why that is, and we have a theory. The Shara Daim have never been divided; you never fought against yourselves. When you left your homeworld, you had the sphere and the data contained there, and while you did lose it, you

still retained much of that technology. That made you superior to other races in your neighborhood, so while you fought many wars, you were never really challenged, never fought against an equal or superior opponent. The Erasi are the same; they were always superior, and always struck before their opponents could become a threat."

"And what? You are different?" Anessa asked.

"Yes," Adrian said, unashamed. "Humans fought against one another for thousands of years, before we even knew how to write. We killed and subjugated, we did horrible things to ourselves, and in the process, we perfected how to fight wars. We have invented such terrible weapons that we ourselves banned them from use. We adapted our technology for war; many of our achievements have been invented for war and nothing else. And I know that you don't understand, you can't understand; you don't have anything in your history that comes close to the things we have done. We remember all the horrible things that we have done, because they should never be forgotten. But those horrors, those wars and struggles are what made us strong. Our weapons are not more advanced than yours are, but we have more variation. Different weapons systems for different situations."

"If you have weapons that can help us defeat the Erasi, you should've shared them," Anessa said.

"We don't." Adrian shook his head. "In a straight battle, our ships against theirs, we have nothing that would miraculously change the outcome of a battle. However, depending on the situation, we have different weapons that would suit them better. My twelve fleets can't stand up to the Erasi numbers, not in a straight fight. However, neither you nor they truly understand the advantage that the skim drives give my fleets. I don't plan on pitting my ships against theirs in a slug match. Humanity learned long ago that fighting a war is not about numbers and power—it is about how you use the assets available to you. It is about manipulating your opponent to remove his advantage and force him to fight when and where you want. My attack will serve more than one purpose; if we are to win against them at Kaleras, we need to be able to guide the flow of battle, and an angry opponent is one that is easily manipulated."

"You are planning to do to them the same thing you did to my Legions in Sol," Anessa said.

"Something similar."

"And you really think that what you are planning can work."

"I always think that my plans will work. The outcome is never exactly as I planned."

Chapter Twenty-One

November; Year 58 of the Empire — Tarabat

Aileen walked through the streets of one of Tarabat's cities dressed in a loose garb that covered all of her features. It was not actually hard for her to hide among Tarabat's masses, especially when the Erasi had stopped actively searching for them. There were many races on Tarabat, and a lot of them had a similar general shape to a human. With her garb, it was impossible for anyone to actually recognize her as human, and most didn't even know what a human was or how they looked. Few cared about the matters of the Erasi, if they were even aware of them. The Erasi had finally released their restrictions on the system. Ships could leave, and the communications were no longer being jammed—or rather, the 'storm' had moved on. Which could mean only one thing: it no longer mattered if she escaped or contacted the Empire. She didn't know anything about what had been happening outside of Tarabat, and the Erasi news didn't reveal anything important.

Now that ships could actually leave the system, she needed to get her people out. She entered the small shop that served as a front for Jurr's meeting place. She removed the garb from her face so that the attendant in front would recognize her and then made her way to the back. Jurr was already there waiting for her.

"I am glad that you've survived, Sentinel," Jurr sent.

"As am I," Aileen told him. **"I need a way off planet and passage to the Empire."**

"The Erasi have given up their search of you, so it will be relatively easy to smuggle you off world. But I have more information for you."

"You know why the Erasi decided that it was more preferable to kill my people than to let us leave?"

"Yes. After the communications were reestablished, my agents reported in. The Erasi are no longer interested in you because their forces have begun or soon will begin their offensive against the Shara Daim, and levy fleets from this sector have augmented their reinforcements. And they are confident that they will win."

Aileen nodded to herself; it was about what she'd believed had happened. **"Then I need to leave as soon as possible."** She would've tried to send a message, but for it to arrive in any reasonable time, she needed to use the Erasi relays, and it was actually far easier for her to leave than to do that without the Erasi knowing where the message was sent and its contents.

“I will make arrangements,” Jurr sent. **“This will mean war between the Empire and the Erasi, yes?”**

“Yes.”

“Then I wish to offer my services. My people have planned for this day for a long time. We have assets in place that can set this Erasi sector on fire, disrupt their communications, and destroy their supplies. There are also many smaller members of the Erasi that are not happy under their rule. If your Empire can promise protection, they will rise against the Erasi.”

“I can promise nothing without first seeing what the situation in the Empire is. After I’ve reached Sol and talked with our leaders, I will pass on your offer.”

“I hope that you will see the advantage. With my help, you could push the Erasi out of this galactic arm.”

Aileen could feel the fervor behind his words. In a way, she understood them. She had once been a slave to the Ra’a’zani; she had seen the rebels and the lengths they had been willing to go to free themselves. But she also knew that the Empire might not be able to do what he wanted.

“I can promise only that we will consider it, nothing else.”

Interlude III

A long time ago

"We did it!" Ullax said as she hugged Waiss and cheered.

"This will change everything!" Axull said, looking at the data. The altered group of Alphas had passed the barrier from stage two to stage three lifeform. They had started improving their tools, building primitive structures, taming wildlife, and planting plant life in the beginnings of agriculture.

"If the only thing necessary to jumpstart intelligence is a conduit to the Sha, we could start altering life across the galaxy!" Ullax said as she untangled herself from Waiss.

Waiss smiled at Axull's sister. "We are a long way from that. First, we need to gather more data. Who knows what kind of effects this could have in the future?"

"Of course, but this discovery will for sure be well received by the Grand Exatts. They might even allow us to accelerate their growth. We could force them to advance faster if we take a direct hand in guiding them. Teaching them about the universe, about advanced technology," Ullax said.

"Yes…" Waiss said. "We would need to be careful, introduce everything slowly, so as to not overwhelm them. And we would need more people."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Axull chided them gently, "we still have a lot of work ahead of us. Once we have enough data to show the council of Exatts that there is no doubt, then we can start planning on how best to accelerate their growth."

"You're right, as always, brother," Ullax said with a smile. "I'll go and start compiling the data that we do have. We still need to repeat this result in at least two more groups," Ullax said, turning around and leaving the room.

Axull turned from the retreating form of his sister to look at Waiss gazing at her longingly. Finally, Axull couldn't take any more. He stepped in front of Waiss, startling him.

"What?" Waiss asked.

"You need to stop acting like this. If you want to have something more than a simple friendship with my sister, you need to go and tell her that."

Waiss stammered, "Uh… I…"

"No. You know who she is. We have spent a long period of time together on this project. She doesn't care for social norms, and she doesn't care for those who are not as driven as she is. You have proven that you are like her; she respects you and knows you. But you

will never get what you want from her if you keep waiting for her to give you some kind of a signal. She just isn't like that," Axull said, and with each word Waiss grew more pale. "Now, go there and tell her how you feel."

Waiss swallowed, then steeled himself and went after Ullax. Axull watched him go in amusement. He was pretty sure that his sister had grown to care about Waiss during these last few years, but he also knew that she, like Waiss, was hopeless when it came to things like that. Thankfully, he as her brother was here to give them a little push.

* * *

Several years passed, and their other groups showed the same progress as the first group. Ultimately, Axull, Ullax, and Waiss decided that it was time. They were going to present their findings to the council of Exatts. And the decision came at an opportune moment, in Axull's opinion; he had grown tired of watching his sister and his best friend cavort around him. Not that he didn't love them, but enough was enough.

Hopefully the Exatts would accept their plans, and give them permission to accelerate the advancement of Alphas. And perhaps after that, allow them to start uplifting more races from across the galaxy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

November; Year 58 of the Empire — Sanctuary

Fleet Commander Nair Hakeem of the First Fleet startled awake from his bed as alarms blazed across his ship. For a moment he thought that was dreaming, and then reality hit. The alarm blazing through the speakers could only mean a hostile force inside the Sanctuary system. Setting aside all the questions that had immediately entered his mind of why and how, he stood, dressed, and ran out of his quarters, going straight towards the command center. On the way, he passed startled crew, all in similar haste running to their posts.

Nair stepped into chaos. The command center was a flurry of activity as people shouted and tried to make sense of the data. His eyes were immediately drawn to the large holo-table in the middle of the room where the entire system was represented, and which showed large red shapes moving from the hyperspace barrier and towards Sanctuary.

Nair approached his command chair and the Ship Master of his flagship, the command ship Astarte. “What do we have?” Nair asked, announcing his presence.

The command center crew calmed down and waited. The Ship Master stood from the command chair, allowing Nair to take his place, and moved to his chair just below the podium.

“Erasi ships have entered the system and are on course towards Sanctuary. They haven’t responded to any attempts at communication, and are assumed hostile,” the Ship Master answered.

Nair nodded, projecting the image of a calm commander. “How many?”

“Early reports put them at just over nineteen thousand—ten Erasi fleets.”

Nair winced. The Sanctuary system was defended only by his single war fleet; the rest were drones and defensive platforms and installations. It was very well defended, but most of its defenses were focused around the trans-stations. Since the location of Sanctuary was inside of the nebula, it had always been assumed that any attack would be forced to come through the lanes. The Erasi had come through hyperspace, which could only mean that they knew the coordinates of the system. It didn’t matter now how they got here, only that they had.

“Status of the fleet?” Nair asked.

“All ships reporting ready status, Fleet Commander.”

“Good,” Nair said. He looked at the holo. The Erasi fleets had come out of the hyperspace near the orbit of the fifth planet in the

system, Gem, and would pass close to Eurus, the system's only gas giant, where most of Sanctuary's shipyards were as well—on their path towards Sanctuary, assuming that Sanctuary was their intended target. He couldn't let them reach Sanctuary. The system's population lived mostly in stations in Sanctuary's orbit, and any fighting close to the planet would certainly finish with many civilian casualties. His best chance of stopping them would be at Eurus. "Open a channel to Fleet Command."

* * *

"I agree with you, Fleet Commander," Fleets Master Laura Reiss said to the hologram of Fleet Commander Nair Hakeem. "We'll contact the Eurus shipyards and start evacuating people. We are bringing the drones online from across the system; they will rendezvous with your fleet as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Fleets Master," Nair said, and closed the channel.

Laura turned to the room, looking at the top officers in the Fleet. "Alright, contact all the stations and assets we have in system. Those close to the Erasi should start evacuating now; those that are unable to do so are to lay low and wait until we can get to them. Olympus City should raise the shields; I don't want any chances taken with the Emperor's life. And keep all of our eyes on that fleet. I want to know what they are doing before they do."

"A lot of our mining operations are vulnerable; they'll need to shut down mining ops before they can evacuate," said Oswald Mein, Commander of Fleets, as Adjutants moved to follow Laura's orders.

"They will need to hunker down and hope for the best," Laura said. "We are going to need to move the defense stations to support the First Fleet."

"The stations can't move much without the skim drives; once they are moved, they will stay wherever they arrive," Oswald said.

Laura nodded, agreeing. "We will move them once the fighting starts." She studied the holo-table for a few moments before turning to Oswald. "How long until Star-Guard One can bring its weapon system online?"

Oswald shook his head. "They are inside Apollo's corona strain testing their shields; as far as I know, most other systems are offline. They would have to resurface first, then bring the weapons online. Assuming that nothing goes wrong, it would take them maybe twenty hours."

Laura glanced at the holo, bringing the data about Star-Guard One up. "They are on the other side of the sun; they will be facing

Sanctuary in sixteen hours…" Laura said. "Contact them, tell them that they have fifteen hours to bring the station out of the corona and get the weapon online."

"Uh… Yes, Fleets Master."

* * *

"Tell me the truth, Laura." Tomas looked at the hologram connecting him to Fleet Headquarters. "Can we fight them off?"

"Yes," Laura answered immediately, then after a bit added, "but, most of our defenses are gathered at the trans-stations, and in Sanctuary's current orbit, they are not in range. Even if we skim the defense stations to help the fleet, there is still so much that can go wrong."

Tomas nodded. "I understand. I will call the other Clans and see if anyone can send help. Do your best," he told her, and closed the channel. The only two Clans that were close enough to actually send help in time were Dai Ven and Warpath. He knew that Laura would've called on the two fleets from the other sectors, but they wouldn't be here in time. He looked around the well-lit room at the people assembled there. They were inside of the bunker below the palace; the rest of the Olympus City's population was underground as well, but then, most of the city was underground, so it was not that much of a bother to most of them.

"We are sure that it is the Erasi?" Seo-yun asked from his left.

"Yes," Tomas said, trying to keep his anger in check.

"We tried to make peace with them at every turn. Why would they do this?" Seo-yun asked aloud.

"I don't know…" Tomas said. He looked at the holo-table that had the relayed information from the Fleet. The Erasi were moving fast, deeper into the system. His system, his home, a place that he had hoped would never know the horrors of war, the Sanctuary of his people. "I need to make some calls," Tomas told Seo-yun, and opened a channel to Warpath and Dai Ven.

* * *

Isani closed the link with the Emperor, and immediately sprang into action calling the guard commanders.

"Get the Vanguard ready, Sanctuary has been attacked. We are sending everything we have as soon as you can get it ready," Isani told them. Tomas had called a conference with him and Clan Leader Jusan,

asking for help. Jusan could send only three thousand drones that served as the guard for Waypoint system, but those drones would reach Sanctuary within hours. Isani's Vanguard ships would take longer; they would need to travel to Waypoint and then to Sanctuary, but they should be there in less than a day. The Vanguard was based on the older designs of the Vanguard fleet—ten unique ships, now upgraded and slightly larger than the older versions. The Vanguard consisted of one thousand ships, ten classes with a hundred ships each.

Isani only hoped that they got there in time.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sanctuary — Command Ship Astarte

Nair watched as the Erasi fleet bombed the mining facilities on the surface of Gem in passing. Seeing the devastation on the planet, he barely managed to hold off on ordering his fleet to skim and engage them. He wanted to do it, but he knew that it would be futile. The skim drive was powerful, but also limited; once used, he would need to wait for it to recharge, and by then he would've been surrounded and defeated. His fleet arrived in orbit of Eurus and rendezvoused with another thousand drone ships just as the Erasi fleet passed Gem and headed straight for his fleet. They were taunting him, he could tell—they didn't need to touch those facilities—but Nair wasn't about to take the bait. He would wait for them to come to him.

"Order the fleet to equip swarm missile loadouts, ready the pods for launch," Nair ordered, and waited for the Erasi. The clock ticked down as the Erasi accelerated, showing the true capabilities of their gravity drives. "How much faster are they than us?" Nair asked the room once the Erasi speed became constant.

"At least thirty percent, Fleet Commander."

"How long until they reach Eurus?"

"Ninety minutes."

"Order taskforce three to move towards Hades' shipyards. Have taskforce two cover them from above the rings, here." Nair pointed at the holo; the place his finger touched turned blue and coordinates immediately appeared, which the Adjutants then relayed to the taskforce. Nair continued adjusting his troops, deciding to spread them around the shipyards that orbited the gas giant. He was setting the board before the Erasi came in range. Once they were close enough, he would engage the Watchtower interface to have a faster and more immersive ability to send out orders. For now, there was no need to tire his mind.

Almost an hour passed when the Erasi plan became apparent. "Only two of their fleets are slowing down," Nair said to himself.

"What do you want to do, Fleet Commander?"

Nair debated with himself. He had committed to defending the shipyards. He had assumed that those would be the Erasi's primary target. They still could be, and they just believed that only two of their fleets were enough to defeat his fleet and the defenses. "Nothing. We are committed to defense. It will take them at least another four hours to reach the defenses at Sanctuary. And we have the skim drives," Nair said. "They've made a mistake; they should've committed their entire force to Eurus. Two fleets we can deal with,

and after we are done, we can move behind the defenses at Sanctuary before they reach them."

Nair knew that the Erasi had some knowledge of the Empire's capabilities; they had witnessed the battle at Sol, and had had a short engagement against retreating battleships when they'd ambushed Adrian. But they didn't really know what their warships could do. They must be underestimating them.

"The Erasi have entered missile range, Fleet Commander."

"Fire."

* * *

From all around the orbit of the gas giant, missile pods and warships fired their missiles at the oncoming Erasi ships. The missiles fired were Swarm MK IX, and as they neared the Erasi point defense range, they split, increasing the number of missiles by six times. Mixed among the Swarm missiles were ion missiles, designed to take down ship shields, and while the Erasi had seen those missiles used in Sol, they didn't have exact scans of them. And even if they did, it wouldn't have mattered; the number of missiles flying towards the Erasi fleets was too large for them to be picked out.

Wave after wave of the Empire's missiles sped towards the Erasi forward fleets, the eight fleets that hadn't been decelerating, and they started taking down missiles with point defense. But with such a large number of missiles, it was impossible to take them down all. The Empire's missiles struck and exploded against the Erasi ships' shields —until the ion missiles arrived. Harsh beams of blue light ripped out of those missiles, targeting the closest Erasi ships and taking down their shields.

The next wave of Swarm missiles didn't encounter shields. The missiles that passed through the point defense slammed against the Erasi ships' hulls.

* * *

Weaver Hanaru winced inwardly as he looked over the damage of the Empire's assault. The number of missiles they had put out had been far larger than what he had anticipated. He had known that the Empire had missiles with longer range than the Erasi, as well as missiles capable of taking down shields, and that they utilized missile pods to increase the number of missiles they could put into space. Yet they must've expended most of their missile arsenal to achieve this

effect. Four of his fleets had suffered damage; three fleets had lost some ships and had suffered minor damage to about half of their number. But the fleet that had taken the brunt of the attack had lost almost ten percent of their hulls entirely, and had also sustained heavy or minor damage to about twenty percent of the rest of the hulls.

It wouldn't matter anyway. Soon eight of his fleets would pass by the gas giant and further into the system. The two fleets he would leave would be enough to keep the Empire's fleet occupied and to do some damage to their shipyards. Hanaru's plan was to keep the system's eyes focused completely on his eight fleets. He wanted them to think them the greatest danger, and if their attention was on those ships, they wouldn't see what he had in store for them.

Then his fleets entered the range of his missiles. He knew that he couldn't expend nearly the same number of missiles that the Empire had; he would need them later. For a moment, he debated firing the missiles, just to hit back against them, but ultimately he knew that he couldn't afford it. He planned to attack more systems, and he couldn't resupply as easily as the Empire could.

Instead, he sent out orders for his ships to target and fire their energy weapons once they were in range, and as they passed the planet.

* * *

Nair leaned back in the command chair and engaged the Watchtower interface. He opened his eyes and floated above his fleet, watching as the Erasi drew closer. They hadn't fired their missiles, which wasn't really surprising; they weren't going to stop and fight here. But he was sure that they would fire in passing. He started sending out orders and organizing his fleet and the shipyard defenses, along with the defense platforms, making sure that they targeted only the ships already damaged by their missiles. He knew that they would have a very short window of time, too short to actually harm an undamaged ship.

Then the Erasi entered the range of the Empire's proton beams. The Empire had the advantage of range in this category as well, and they opened fire first. Beams shot out of the Empire's turrets, reaching out to the Erasi. The Erasi returned fire as their speed brought them into range, and the exchange filled the space between them for a short time as their incredible speed sent them out of the range of his weapons.

Nair looked over the aftermath of the exchange in satisfaction.

The Empire had again come out on top; the Erasi had lost more ships, while the only loss on Nair's part was eleven defense platforms. A great number of his ships that had been the closest to the Erasi fleets had suffered minor damage in places where the shield emitters had failed under Erasi fire, but he had lost only seven ships. It wasn't that surprising; the Empire's ships were slower than the Erasi's for a reason. The Empire built their ships out of metal alloys, with thick hulls. They had far greater mass, which was why it took so much power to move them, but it also made the Empire's ships much more durable.

He watched the eight fleets for a moment, and then he turned towards the two fleets that had slowed down and were about to enter the range of his missiles.

* * *

Two hundred and sixty of the Erasi's newest stealth ships moved through the system undetected. All the eyes of the Empire were focused on ten fleets that had invaded the system. And so, the Empire's scanners missed the launch of the stealth ships' weapons. Rocks, gathered in the system's asteroid belt, were accelerated with the stealth ships' top-of-the-line gravity drives, sending them on their way towards targets that the Erasi were certain did not have shields. Those targets would most certainly be civilian, but the Erasi had a mission that had to be fulfilled, no matter the cost. They had to create chaos across the Empire, to hurt them so much that they pulled back their forces from the Shara Daim territory in order to defend their own.

The stealth ships sent rocks from all around the system, minimizing the chance that if one group was detected, the others would be as well. And in addition to the accelerated rocks, the stealth ships fired planetary bombardment weapons as well, weapons that would coast through space until they reached their intended targets and destroy them. With that part of their mission done, the stealth ships moved to rendezvous with the rest of the Erasi fleets.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sanctuary — Fleet Headquarters

Laura watched over the battle in the orbit of Eurus from the Fleet Headquarters. The First Fleet had engaged the two Erasi fleets that had slowed down. Missiles flew from both sides, with the First Fleet's side keeping up with the two Erasi fleets' missiles numbers. But she knew that they wouldn't be able to do that for long. As the two forces moved into the range of energy weapons, the Erasi started focusing and destroying the defense platforms as well as attacking the shipyard, almost ignoring the First Fleet. Another two thousand drones had arrived from Waypoint, and Laura debated sending them to Eurus, but ultimately decided against it. That battle wasn't suited for drones, and the First Fleet already had two thousand drones; any more and the command team's effectiveness would drop as they would be forced to take control of too many drones.

Laura watched and waited for the Erasi fleets to fully commit to Eurus, and for their other forces to move sufficiently away that they wouldn't be able to turn back quick enough. Two hours later, just as she'd planned with Fleet Commander Hakeem, she gave the order to the massive defense station protecting the Waypoint trans-lane. A moment later, the large station entered the skim.

Several minutes after that, it arrived at its destination.

* * *

The Erasi fleets kept focusing their fire at the shipyards, forcing Nair to move his ships to defend them, but even then he was doing nothing. The shipyards were too large for him to be able to cover them with his numbers. Almost forty-five percent of the shipyards had sustained some kind of damage. The Erasi kept their ships at the edge of their main weapons' range, preventing Nair's ships from using their mid- and close-range weapons, forcing the battle to be fought only with missiles and energy weapons.

The Erasi shouldn't be aware of the Empire's other weapon systems; their tactics were only a reflection of their own weapons systems. Their main weapons were long-range energy weapons, supplemented by missiles; they didn't have anything else. However, Nair couldn't leave the defenses to close the range; the Erasi still outnumbered him, and he didn't want to risk them surrounding his ships.

Then a massive signature appeared behind the Erasi fleet, and

Nair smiled as a ripple effect went through the Erasi lines as the station started firing missiles and proton beams in their back line. Then a powerful gravity event appeared at the same place as an Erasi battleship, and Nair watched as the battleship crumpled in the middle and then exploded, sending debris flying into the closest ships, overtaxing their shields and smashing through.

Seeing the Erasi fleets confused and disoriented, he gave the order for his ships to leave the defenses and close the range, pinning the Erasi fleets against the station.

* * *

Hanaru watched as the Empire's massive defense station appeared behind his two fleets, as he had known it would. He had hoped for more than one of the defense stations to move; Erasi scientists had theorized that such large stations would have a much longer recharge time for their FTL drives, which meant that the station that had used its drives was effectively one less his main force had to worry about. The Empire's fleet had started moving from behind the defenses to close the range with his two fleets. If he had been fighting ships that he knew had the same capabilities as his own, he would've wondered about that decision; there was no point in closing range, as most warships main weapons were long range.

Erasi knew little about the actual warships of the Empire. They knew that they had other weapons systems, but the only ones they had encountered in use were lasers, long-range energy weapons, and missiles. They knew that they had other weapons—visual scans had revealed them—but the Erasi analysts had no idea what they were. That meant that the Empire closing the range was in fact far more dangerous than Hanaru's training indicated. He debated ordering his fleets to turn and fight the station, trying to take it down, but there was no point. He was not here to engage in battles against the Empire's forces; his mission was to wreak as much havoc in this system as he could.

He glanced at the timer on his holo, seeing another eight hours to go. His eight fleets would reach the first line of defenses in seven. He opened a channel and ordered his two fleets to retreat and head towards the third planet in the system. There were a few installations on that world's surface, as well as several stations in orbit. Hopefully he would manage to provoke another station, or at least split the Empire's defending fleet.

* * *

Nair's fleet closed the range with the Erasi ships. As soon as his battleships entered the range, their powerful plasma cannons rapid-fired plasma torpedoes into the Erasi ships that had no shields. They were at the extreme range of plasma weapons, so about one in four of the fired plasma torpedoes lost containment and dissipated before reaching their targets, but those that did hit ate through the Erasi ships, burning through their hulls. The dreadnoughts changed targets, and started feeding their impressive weapons fire into the still undamaged Erasi super battleships, proton beams smashing against their shields. And as they entered mid-range, the dreadnoughts' powerful ion cannons fired, breaking the Erasi shields and allowing their kinetic turrets to finish the job. His drones blanketed space with kinetic shells, pelting any Erasi ships without shields. The station had been swathing any ship near it with its gravity weapon, and its missiles and proton beams blew anything else to pieces.

Then the Erasi ships started accelerating, moving out of the range of both the station and his fleet, their retreating fire striking against his ships. Half an hour later, every remaining Erasi ship had moved outside of the range his forces. Nair checked their trajectory, and saw them heading towards Boreas and not in the direction to meet with the rest of their fleets. Boreas had several research stations both in orbit and on the surface, stations that weren't defended, but Nair knew that they had already been evacuated, as most of the system had been. All had been moved behind the protective lines around Sanctuary. At worst, the Erasi would just inflict material damage, but even that made him angry. From their action, it was clear that they had come here to inflict as much damage as they could.

With a last look at the retreating Erasi fleets, Nair gave the order for the First Fleet to enter skim, moving behind the defenses around Sanctuary.

* * *

Laura seethed as she read the reports. The Erasi had inflicted significant damage to the shipyards, killed thousands of people on them, and halting the Sanctuary shipbuilding for months, if not years. And at the exact moment when they couldn't afford that. She read through the rest of the reports, seeing that the two Erasi fleets had suffered significant damage. They had lost at least thirty percent of their hulls, while the First Fleet had lost only sixty-two warships. It would be another eight hours before the Erasi warships reached the first defenses, enough time to rearm the First Fleet.

And she had lost use of one defense station, which was probably

what the Erasi had intended. The recharge time for the defense station was thirty-two hours, by which time, if she wasn't wrong about the Erasi's objectives, they would be gone. Now she had only two stations remaining and would need to make sure that she used them when they would be able to inflict the most damage to the invaders.

* * *

Hanaru's fleets reached the first of the Empire's defense platforms, and immediately they opened fire. Thousands of energy beams struck against his ships, just as he gave the order for his fleets to fire missiles. His ships flooded the space with missiles, overcoming the defense platforms' defenses and destroying them one by one. As his ships moved forward, more and more of stations and defense platforms came into range, and the Empire's defense fleet moved to engage from behind the defenses where they had moved to once his two fleets had retreated, and they too opened fire. The two forces engaged in a delicate balance as they each tried to get an upper hand on the other without overextending.

Hanaru glanced at the timer. There was only a few minutes left.

* * *

Several hours ago, a lone scanning drone detected unknown moving objects. Hampered by the fact that it was the only drone that detected them, it couldn't extrapolate the objects' trajectory or speed. The drone sent its report to the monitoring station. Seeing as there was a hostile fleet in the system, the station's AI gave the report a low importance and put in the massive queue that was on hold until the situation in the system was resolved.

* * *

Laura paled in horror as alarms started blazing inside her control room. She watched the hologram and saw stations in orbit of Sanctuary and around the protective cover of the defenses get hit by something. Holes were open in their hulls, venting entire sections while others were ripped to pieces.

"Those are civilian stations," someone said in horror, as several habitat stations exploded or were open to space. Laura watched helplessly, unable to do anything, because as fast as it had begun, it

was over. Before she could ask what happened, more alarms sprung to life. Laura watched as objects appeared in the orbits of Sanctuary and Thanatos and started descending towards the planet and the moon. The massive defensive turrets of Thanatos swiveled and started taking down the objects that were targeting various facilities on the surface of the moon.

Ultimately, several passed through and struck against the large shield dome that protected the Fleet Headquarters, but that was the only place on the moon that had the shield; the other facilities hadn't been equipped with one yet. Two struck at the Fleet Academy, wiping it off the surface of the moon, while the third smashed just outside the shield and destroyed the spaceport.

On Sanctuary, the situation was similar. The Olympus City defensive turrets took down most of them, but two passed through and struck the city shields, bathing the sky above the city in red. Two more had entered Sanctuary's orbit and destroyed two research facilities on the southern continent, which had no defenses.

Laura forced her eyes from the devastation and to the Erasi fleets that were fighting the defenses and the First Fleet. Immediately she saw that they were disengaging, turning to run away. And after what they had just done, she will not allow them run away. She ordered both of the stations to move and keep the Erasi in position. There was only ten more minutes until Star-Guard One was in range.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Nair was shaken by the destruction in Sanctuary's vicinity. The early reports suggested that the attack was executed by kinetic weapons; how they were unnoticed didn't matter now. What did was making the Erasi pay for the people on those stations that they had slaughtered. Nair had failed in his duty to protect this system, but he wouldn't let the Erasi leave unpunished. Their forces had already started pulling back and, if Nair was reading the patterns in their movements right, splitting into several smaller forces. The First Fleet accelerated, following the Erasi and firing their proton beams and missiles at the retreating ships, even as they were slowly gaining speed and moving out of his fleet's range.

Then two massive stations left the skim in positions behind them, exiting close enough that one small Erasi destroyer actually collided with the station's shields. The stations leaving the skim so close must've wrecked the Erasi ships' systems, and Nair saw that he was right when the ships in the close vicinity of the stations died without even firing back as missiles and proton beams slammed into unprotected ships drifting forward.

The two stations forced the Erasi to change course and move away from the stations, which allowed his fleet to catch up. His ships fired at the Erasi, who were now trying to move above the sun's plane, closing their ranks to weather the assault of the stations. Two of the Erasi fleets close to one of the stations turned their attention to the station, buying time for the rest to move away.

Nair's fleet managed to close range with the back element of the retreating Erasi force, mauling them with a flurry of plasma torpedoes, proton beams, kinetic weapons, and missiles. Ion missiles knocked down the Erasi shields, and kinetic weapons finished any ship close enough to the Empire's fleet. The stations had mauled the two fleets that were covering the rest, and hundreds of ships or their pieces floated around the stations, one of which was leaking atmosphere and had lost shields in several areas as the retreating Erasi ships poured fire into it.

Nair saw that the Erasi were about to move out of his fleet's range again, and soon after out of the range of the stations. He ordered all his ships to reassemble into a formation and prepare their skim drives; he was not about to let them get away. He contacted the Fleet Headquarters informing them of his plan. Just as he was about to give the order, the Fleet ordered him to hold off. Before he had the chance to ask for a clarification, a bright wall of light pierced through the Erasi, sweeping through their formation. In a span of three seconds,

thousands of Erasi warships, almost a fourth of their entire force, ceased to exist. Not even dust remained as proof that they had been there.

* * *

Hanaru watched in satisfaction as his plan worked. The Empire had missed his attack and all of his targets had been destroyed. *Not every target,* he reminded himself. He hadn't anticipated that the Empire would have planetary shields. Those were extremely hard to manufacture, and even the Erasi only had them on the planets in the core systems. Other than that, his attack had been successful. His ships had wrecked the Empire's system, destroying or crippling its infrastructure.

He gave the order for his fleets to split into small groups and head for the hyperspace barrier, taking shots at any target of opportunity. However, just as his fleets started moving apart, the last two of the Empire's defense stations showed up. They exited their FTL as close to his fleets as they were able without colliding, and Hanaru saw a number of ships in two of his fleets lose controls. The phenomenon that occurred once the Empire used its FTL drives was well known to Hanaru, and one of the things he had worried most about, as he had no way of protecting against it.

The disabled ships died in minutes as the two stations opened fire, and their positions forced Hanaru to issue new orders and gather his ships into a large formation to protect them from the onslaught of missiles and weapons fire. His ships sped away as the Empire's gravity weapon reached out and ripped ships apart.

With no choice, he ordered two of his fleets to slow and protect the rest; he was already losing more ships than he had anticipated, and if he was going to fulfil the rest of his mission and start attacking other Empire systems, he would need every ship. The Empire war fleet kept firing at his back, and he was losing ships fast, as they were focusing on retreating.

The defense stations were proving themselves an incredible threat. One of his fleets managed to get through one station's shields and inflict damage to the massive thing. Seeing as the rest of his fleets had managed to move out of their range, he recalled the two fleets and left the stations drifting slowly in space, useless when his ships had left the range of their weapons. The Empire's war fleet was still in pursuit, but their inferior speed meant that his fleets would have no more problems. He knew that they would use their FTL drives again, but a single fleet was not as big of a threat as their stations were.

Hanaru looked at his subordinates. “Relay the order for the fleets to scatter per the plan,” he ordered. The eight fleets would split into four groups of two fleets each, and leave the system through hyperspace, then attack already chosen systems through the Empire’s territory.

As his fleets prepared to scatter, alarms blasted across his ship and his holo went offline.

“What happened?” Hanaru asked angrily.

“We don’t know, Weaver, our systems overloaded. Bringing everything online now.”

A moment later, the holo came back online, only there was a large hole in the middle of his formation.

“Where are my ships?”

“We don’t know, Weaver, they are gone,” his subordinate answered stupidly. “Checking records now,” the subordinate added, and Hanaru waited impatiently.

“Just before the overload, the scanners detected a large source of energy buildup… And there was some kind of energy surge passing through the middle of our formation.”

“What kind of energy surge?”

“We don’t know, Weaver… We are getting data from other ships now…” He read through the data for a moment or two before turning back to Hanaru. “The energy was a weapon of some kind, Weaver. Our ships… they have been destroyed.”

Hanaru looked at his subordinates incredulously. A weapon that could destroy more than three thousand warships in a moment?

“Show me the source.”

A moment later, the holo changed to show him the image of the system’s sun, and there in its orbit, entirely too close to the sun itself, was a massive station, its surface illuminated by the clearly visible shields and several openings in its hull that were pointed at his fleet.

“There is another energy build up from the station, Weaver.”

Hanaru hesitated only a moment before speaking. “Scatter the fleets, now!”

* * *

The command room in the Fleet Headquarters erupted in cheers as the Star-Guard One station punched a hole in the Erasi numbers. Almost three and a half thousand ships, gone in an instant, an entire fleet.

“How soon can they fire again?” Laura turned and asked Oswald.

Oswald leaned to look at the holo. “They drained their

capacitators to fire that beam. To fire another one like that? It will take them days to charge the capacitators enough. But they can fire a smaller beam, one every twenty minutes."

"How big of a beam?"

"Around two hundred meters across."

"Will it lose on power?"

"No, not at this range. If the Erasi move past the Eurus orbit, then yes, the weapon can't reach that far," Oswald answered.

"Contact Nair, tell him to be ready to split his fleet into small taskforces to hunt down the Erasi ships. I think that the Erasi commander will figure out that the only way he can minimize the losses from Star-Guard One is to spread his ships thin."

* * *

Hanaru watched as the Empire's station fired at his fleets again, this time a much smaller beam but one that still destroyed one hundred and forty ships. The beam passed through everything, hitting every ship and burning all that it touched. Eleven of his super battleships exploded as the beam burned holes through them. Several ships were hit and managed to survive, as they caught the edge of the beam, and a few more managed to survive while being crippled and unable to move.

The Empire's fleet continued chasing them, firing missiles, as Hanaru tried to organize his ships. Then another beam swiped through the fleets, destroying another ninety-three ships. Seeing no other course, Hanaru ordered them to scatter so that no ship was directly behind another, which would make his fleet more vulnerable to the Empire's ships but would ensure that the station would only be able to take out one ship at a time.

But while his ships moved, the station managed to fire two more times, destroying another two hundred and thirty-three ships. Hanaru had come to this system with ten fleets, almost twenty thousand ships. And he had lost just over seven thousand, far more than what he had believed he would lose. And as the Empire's station kept destroying his ships, that number kept getting higher. Then the Empire defense fleet disappeared, entering their FTL, and less than a minute later, they appeared again.

The Empire had split their fleet in two, and each had attacked smaller elements of his fleets. In order to protect his ships from the Empire's station, he had made them vulnerable to their ships. With their FTL—and smaller recharge times for their ships—they would be able to overcome his smaller groups and destroy them with numbers

advantage. His fleets were all heading towards the hyperspace barrier in different directions, but the Empire would still be able to catch them with their FTL drives. Hanaru checked the distances and started calculating the timing. Some of his forces would be able to get away, but only a fraction of what he had thought he would have.

With no other choice, he contacted the two fleets that had just finished a bombing run on the installations at the third planet, and ordered them to leave the system and go directly to the fallback system, not continuing to the next Empire system. Once he escaped this system, Hanaru would have far fewer ships than he had planned for initially, and would need to adjust his plans. Splitting his forces might not be a good idea anymore.

As Hanaru was thinking on how best to continue his mission in the future, a beam of energy ripped through his ship, evaporating his command center and him in it. His life ended with no warning, and just a moment after his super battleship was destroyed, a new fleet entered the Empire's system through one of its trans-lanes.

* * *

Nair watched as the Erasi battleship exploded under the fire of one of his dreadnoughts, and close after the last Erasi ship in this small group. He was no longer using the Watchtower interface, as there was no need; this was no longer a fleet action. His ships were hunting down the Erasi in small groups. Nair glanced at the timer and saw another seven minutes before his ships could enter skim and hit another group of Erasi ships.

"Fleet Commander," an Adjutant called from his right. "Warpath's Vanguard has arrived. They are placing themselves at your command and are asking where you want them."

Nair smiled at the good news. "Send them the priority groups, and let them pick a group and start destroying Erasi ships. Warn them to check with Fleet for Star-Guard fire; we don't want them to skim to somewhere where the station will fire."

Nair turned back to the holo and studied the fleeing Erasi ships. There were still more of them, but they couldn't gather in anything larger than a dozen ships; otherwise, Star-Guard would kill them faster. Their only remaining action was to run and hope that they got to the hyperspace barrier faster than the Empire could destroy them.

Chapter Twenty-Six

December; Year 58 of the Empire — Empire Command Ship Gallant

Adrian's fleet dropped out of hyperspace almost a light month away from their target. Far enough away that they were out of the Erasi's active sensors range, and sufficiently away that there was no chance for their exit from hyperspace to have been seen. Adrian turned to the command room crew of the command ship Gallant. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Lord Sentinel. We are in contact with the forward element, everything is ready to go," Fleet Commander Rtsaar answered.

Adrian nodded at the Guxcacul, and turned to look at the holo, which started showing him a real-time image of the Erasi fleet that they were receiving from the stealth ships in the system. The plan was to hit them hard, hit them fast, and before they could react. He checked the positions of the Erasi ships in the area of the massive cloud-like formation of the Erasi fleet that he was planning on attacking. With his implant, he adjusted the targets a bit to account for the slight shift in the Erasi formation. Then he turned back to the Fleet Commander.

"Send the first wave," Adrian ordered.

Rtsaar manipulated her console, and a moment later, she relayed the order. Fifty-one cargo ships released the skim missiles from their holds, five thousand one hundred in total, and their thrusters fired up, sending the missiles forward towards the system as they settled into a formation. The cargo ships then turned around and entered hyperspace, going back to Kaleras. As soon as the missiles achieved max velocity, just over two hundred missile pods activated their skim drives and disappeared, followed quickly behind by the skim missiles. A timer appeared and started ticking down over the large holo-table, one counting down until the missiles and pods arrived at their destination.

"What is the chance that they would notice the skims and react before our wave gets there?" Adrian asked.

"Less than twenty percent," Iris answered.

Adrian nodded and turned to the holo. Everyone around him watched and waited as the timer ticked down. Then when it hit the halfway point, Adrian gave the order for the fleet to enter skim. The twelve fleets entered skim. Twenty and a half thousand warships started on their way towards the Erasi fleet that outnumbered them thirteen to one.

* * *

The Empire's missile pods exited the skim first, dropping out of it inside the outer layer of the large Erasi formation. Six pods didn't survive the trip as a small group of Erasi ships moved into the area. The pods smashed into three Erasi battleships, blowing them to bits and destroying the pods in the process. Their targets had been well chosen in advance, and before the Erasi even had a chance of detecting them, the pods started releasing their missiles. With the element of surprise, the pods got the first strike. Each of the pods carried three hundred missiles, and they were firing them as fast as possible, but the first missile struck against an Erasi warship long before the last missile left the pod.

Confusion reigned, and just as the Erasi were figuring out what was happening, a mere minute after the pods had exited skim, the skim missiles arrived. Five thousand one hundred missiles, or something more like shuttles armed with nuclear weapons, dropped out of skim, and their thrusters pushed them towards their target, across the section of the Erasi formation. Nuclear fire blossomed, destroying super battleships in its wake, and the EMP taking down the systems of the surrounding ships.

Caught unprepared, the Erasi couldn't respond. Across their fleet, chaos spread.

* * *

Adrian's fleets dropped out of skim at the furthest edge of the Empire's missile range. Immediately, his holo updated, and he saw the devastation that his attack had wrought.

"Order all ships to fire," Adrian told Rtsaar, and she relayed his orders.

Every Empire ship started firing missiles as fast as their launchers could handle. The drones and cruisers started firing explosive kinetic shells intended to overload their shields in the direction of the massive cloud of ships. Battleships and dreadnoughts targeted their k-turrets in the general direction and started firing the ship killer kinetic weapons. Tens of thousands of missiles left his fleets every second, countless slugs of metal, and hundreds of kinetic ship killers, and soon the Gallant's holo was filled with missile signatures streaking across space towards his confused and disoriented enemies, who wouldn't even know of danger until it was much too late.

Adrian had chosen the types of missiles his forces equipped for this mission very carefully. The pods were armed with a mix of

MAHEM MK VII and Enforcer MK X missiles. MAHEM for their powerful magnetic force generators that would shape the missile's liquid core into a spearhead and penetrate deep into an unshielded hull to deliver their explosives inside, ensuring if not a complete destruction of the enemy ship, then at least critical damage. And the Enforcer missiles were chosen for their sheer destructive power. They were simple explosive warheads equipped with small, shimmering fields, enough that they could survive point defense long enough to reach their targets.

Most of the missiles that his warships had fired were Swarm MK IX missiles, with ion missiles mixed in. By the time those missiles reached the Erasi, they would have gotten their shields online, and would actively be searching for the enemy. At the highest rate of fire, the last of his ships finished emptying their missile and kinetic magazines almost half an hour later, just as the first fired missiles passed the halfway point towards the Erasi.

"Order a retreat," Adrian told Rtsaar, while his eyes were still glued to the holo. His twelve fleets had fired more missiles for this one engagement than what the Empire had used in the entire war with the Sowir. And by now, the Erasi must've noticed. His ships turned and made their way towards the hyperspace barrier. The Erasi ships were faster, and Adrian did not want to be caught by a force far larger than his; the counter above him told him that the skim drives across the fleets would be recharged in around twenty minutes. He would be able to escape long before the Erasi caught up, but he didn't want that, not yet. His ships were not moving at their top speed, because he wanted them to follow.

Adrian's attacks had targeted a part of the formation that was dense, and occupied only by Erasi warships. He could've attacked their support fleets and probably destroyed far more ships, but that would've harmed only their force's long-term capability, and Adrian needed to harm their short-term capabilities. Another possible target had been their levy fleets, but from gathered intelligence he knew that they were a mix of races that were less advanced than the Erasi, with a few exceptions that were on par. Adrian needed to hurt them, and that meant attacking Erasi ships of the line. He had wanted to take a shot at one of their massive ships, of which there were now two, and one of which had probably been a part of the ambush on Numvani, but unfortunately those ships were at the center of the formation. Impossible to get with a skim missile without it hitting something before and losing most of its destructive potential. So Adrian had settled with destroying as many of their warships as possible.

And by the look of it, he had succeeded. The pods and the skim missiles had been effective. There was no way for him to tell the exact

number of destroyed ships, not with all the confusion and destruction. But he knew that the number had to be high; he had caught them completely off guard.

Then his attack reached the Erasi. Not surprisingly, they had managed to recover enough from the sneak attack. The Erasi ships had their shields online, and they had a semblance of a formation in the first line reestablished. It didn't matter. His missiles overwhelmed that first line, smashing through and destroying it in its entirety and pushing deeper into the formation. Kinetic shells pelted the shield of any ship in their path; his ship killers shattered against their shields and, in the cases of them coming against a smaller class of ship, punched through entirely, destroying the ship in the process.

Two large forces of ships, both from parts of the formation untouched by his attack, started accelerating towards his fleets. The two large forces outnumbered his twelve fleets by almost a factor of two. They took the most direct path towards him, as he'd known that they would.

Adrian's fleet kept running, utilizing only about ninety percent of their drives, fast enough that they wouldn't suspect something and yet slow enough that their calculation told them that they would overtake his ships before the hyperspace barrier. His skim drives had already been recharged, but Adrian gambled on the fact that the Erasi would be too enraged to wonder why he hadn't skimmed away.

Both Erasi forces flew right into his trap.

Even before Adrian had entered this system, he had lain a trap. His stealth ships had lain mines along the direct route that his ships would take to leave the system. Although they weren't really mines, just missiles floating in space and guiding drones that would detect hostile ships once they entered range, and as soon as the last line of Erasi ships did so, they activated.

Missiles all around and inside the Erasi formations activated, found targets, and sped towards them. Ion missiles took down shields and Enforcer missiles blew their hulls open. In a span of several minutes, the two Erasi forces had lost half of their number.

Adrian's face contorted into a predatory smile as he ordered his fleets to turn around and attack the now weakened force. Burning at full thrust, his ships advanced on the surviving Erasi ships. He kept out of the range of their energy weapons and pummeled them with his proton beams, taking down their pathetic and disorganized attempts at striking back with missiles. As his fleets destroyed the last ship, he noticed more leaving the large formation in pursuit.

Adrian ordered his fleet towards the hyperspace barrier, and as Erasi entered the missile range, he watched and waited. When they had expended a significant number of missiles, and when they had

reached more than two thirds of the way to his ships, he ordered his fleets to skim. Leaving the Erasi with a taste of what awaited them in Kaleras.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

December; Year 58 of the Empire — Erasi Devastator End of Hope

The reports kept coming in, filling the holograms in the command room of Garash's devastator. Somehow, it didn't yet seem real to him. The Empire's ships had attacked his great force, and had destroyed tens of thousands of ships. The attack had come out of nowhere, and with a devastating effect. Before his ships could recover enough and bring their shields online, the Empire's attack had ravaged his formation. This attack by the Empire had destroyed almost forty-three thousand ships, and all because he hadn't seen it coming.

"They destroyed almost a fourth of my force," Garash whispered, "and damaged at least half as many more." He raised his eyes to glare at Valanaru, who stood on the other side of the holo-table.

"We didn't know that they had such weapons; we didn't even imagine that they could utilize their FTL drives in such a manner," Valanaru said.

"What good are you, then, to me? To the Erasi?" Garash asked harshly. "This is your purpose, *Weaver*." He said the last word mockingly. "The Weavers are the ones that were supposed to gather information about other races."

"If you hadn't pushed for this war"—Valanaru glared back at him—"if you hadn't disregarded the Empire as insignificant, we would've had the time to learn more about them."

Garash's face twitched in annoyance. "It doesn't matter, they will die soon enough."

"You still intend to continue with the assault?" Valanaru asked, perplexed.

"Of course. They hurt my fleet, but I still outnumber them."

"But what of the Empire's weapons? You saw what they did to us, and you want to attack them?"

"They caught us unaware, with no shields and no point defense net, and they used nuclear weapons to spread even more confusion and destruction. That will not happen again," Garash said resolutely. "And I do not believe that we will encounter these weapons again."

"And why not?" Valanaru asked.

"Because if they had more, they would've used them already, destroyed all of my forces. However, they didn't; this was only a desperate attack to reduce our numbers. But even if they had more, I would still go." Garash looked at Valanaru and allowed his rage to rise to his eyes. "In all of the years of my life, I have never before been so humiliated. That Human and Shara Daim bested me on that planet, and then dared to attack my ships!" he bellowed angrily, making the

air around him tremble.

"We should call for more aid from the core," Valanaru added carefully.

"There is no time. If we don't strike now, defeat the Shara Daim and then turn towards the Empire, they will grow to become too large of a threat to be defeated."

"Every moment that you give the Empire, they will use to build more of those weapons," Valanaru cautioned.

"I won't give them time. I will destroy theirs and the Shara Daim's fleets at Kaleras. While Weaver Hanaru creates chaos in the Empire's territory, I will end the Shara Daim and then turn to the Empire."

"Every time we have gone against them, things did not go according to plan. Be careful, Garash; the loss of this force would not be received well by the rest of the O'fa."

"They have nothing else to throw at me, I am confident of that. And after Kaleras falls, they will have no fleets left to oppose us. If you do not care for my plans, you are welcome to get back to Tarabat and wait. I will not have you and your manipulating ways inserting doubts into my head when I cannot afford a single mistake."

* * *

Kaleras

Anessa looked over the records that Adrian had showed her of his attack on the Erasi for the tenth time. She hadn't really believed him when he'd told her what he was going to do, yet somehow he always did exactly what he claimed he would. She watched the devastation among the Erasi fleets recorded by the Empire's stealth ships in the system, and shuddered imagining those weapons being used against her own fleets. The Erasi were too surprised to act, to defend themselves, and that had cost them.

"If you've had these kind of weapons, we could've defeated the Erasi by now," Anessa said, turning to look at Adrian, who was standing to her left.

"You wouldn't; we didn't have them until recently. And I used most of what we had there," Adrian said, pointing at the holo.

"But you have more?"

"Only a hundred or so missile pods, and a dozen skim missiles. Lurker of the Depths had been working nonstop to build them, but it won't be enough. They won't be unprepared again; the missile pods won't hurt them nearly as much as they did there when they have their shields active. We are still outnumbered," Adrian said somberly.

“These new ships of theirs are better than yours, their weapons and shields more powerful, and they are faster than my ships. They still have the advantage.”

“We are defending,” Anessa said.

“Defending gives us an initial advantage, but they won’t get close enough to let our fixed defenses harm them. If I was them, I would take them out by missiles or kinetic weapons.”

“Erasi don’t use kinetic weapons.”

“Space is filled with rocks; all they have to do is collect enough and push them towards our platforms and stations,” Adrian told her.

“So you still don’t think that we can win?”

“It will be very hard. If we can force them to make a few mistakes, if we can hit them when they do, force them to overextend, then perhaps…” Adrian said, “I and my fleets will do everything we can to help you.”

* * *

The few of the Empire’s remaining stealth ships watching over the Erasi force observed for two days as the Erasi readied their force. The ships that had been too damaged to move or fight effectively had been left behind, while those lightly damaged had been hastily repaired. In the end, several thousand of the Erasi ships stayed behind, as well as one of the two massive ships. The stealth ships waited and transmitted everything, until every Erasi ship heading for Kaleras entered hyperspace and left.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

December; Year 58 of the Empire — Sanctuary

Laura Reiss, Fleets Master of the Empire, entered the private office of Emperor Tomas Klein. She found him standing by a window looking out at Olympus City. Behind him on a holo-table were several different reports, those of the battle in Sanctuary, and the subsequent chase of the Erasi ships through the system, damage reports, casualty reports—lists of names, too many for them all to be shown at the same time.

"Tomas?" Laura said, trying to grab his attention. When he didn't respond, she stepped closer. She was just about to say something again when he spoke.

"I can't memorize all of their names," Tomas said, still looking through the window. "There are just too many of them. I can put the lists with their names in my implant, call on them at any time, but I can't keep them in my own mind. Sixteen and a half million people, dead."

"Those deaths are not your fault, Tomas."

He turned and gave her a sad smile. "The responsibility for the lives of the people of the Empire ultimately lies with me. I was the one that ordered the Sentinels to seek a diplomatic solution with the Erasi, even when we knew that they were stalling, all because I was worried about perceptions. As if I hadn't learned anything from Earth." His face twisted in pain. "Did you find them?"

"No, only about fifteen hundred of their ships managed to escape, and we haven't seen any sign of them. It isn't surprising, really; they must've dropped out of hyperspace in deep space and then turned to their destination. I have started sending more scout ships trying to find them, but…" Laura shook her head. "Our territory is too big, we have stretched too far. Most of our systems are empty, and there are huge swaths of territory virtually empty between Clans."

"Another one of my ideas. I was so worried that we might not be able to grow in the future that I forced us to take more territory than we can hold," he said grimly.

"There is something else. The relays between the Shara Daim and the Empire are finally up and running. We've received a message from Adrian; the Erasi had called for peace talks and then tried to kill him and Anessa. They almost succeeded. Akash is dead, and Adrian tells me that if the wolions and Lurker of the Depths hadn't been there, both Adrian and Anessa would've been dead. The Erasi force is going to move against Kaleras, and Adrian and Anessa just don't have the numbers to defend. Adrian thinks that he has a plan that can hurt

them a bit before they attack, but he doesn't think that it will be enough. He asked that we send anything that we can to Kaleras, although if his calculations are right, whatever we send will come after the Erasi attack the system. He hopes that they will be able to hold out for long enough."

"If I hadn't asked the Shara Daim to wait, if we had put pressure on the Erasi together, then perhaps none of this would've happened."

"You can't second guess your decisions. It was not your fault, you are not responsible for their actions," Laura said forcefully.

"But it is my fault," Tomas said angrily. "I am the one that has kept us back on purpose, because I wanted us to struggle." He sneered at himself and shook his head. "I was an idiot. I was so focused on threats so far into the future that I completely disregarded those that were in the present."

"Tomas—" Laura started.

"No!" Tomas swiped his clenched fist in her direction. "They attacked Sanctuary! A place that was supposed to be untouchable, the one place where our people were supposed to be safe! I was an idiot; I thought that we could protect ourselves enough as it is, that we had time to slowly develop and master the technologies from the sphere. That we can coexist with other races peacefully. But I see now that the only thing that matters in the universe is power. You need to have a big enough stick that no one dares to come against you. And I do have that stick—I just thought that using it would harm us more than not using it." Tomas walked over to the holo and pointed at the list of names. "And those people paid for it. They died because the Erasi thought that we are weak, that they could come here and kill our people with no repercussions."

He turned to look at Laura. "You know that is true. The only reason they dared to do something like this is because they believe that we are not a threat, that their people are safe from any retaliation. But they are wrong."

"Tomas, we don't have the ships to fight them," Laura said.

"We only need one."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I have Axull Darr's ship, the ship built by the People. We had it for ten years, and I kept it a secret."

"Where is it?"

"In Warpath. I didn't want to tell people because I wanted us to develop things on our own, not copy the People. Warpath is building ships similar to it, but they won't be ready for a while. We don't need fleets; that one ship is so far beyond everything that the Erasi have," Tomas said. "Don't worry, I won't let Adrian fight a losing battle."

* * *

"You want me to do what?" Isani asked for the second time, thinking the he must've heard wrong.

"I want you to take the Enduring to Shara Daim territory," Tomas answered slowly.

"Tomas, we can't fight in this ship. Our consoles can barely move it. We don't have interfaces with the weapons or a million other things," Isani said.

"You are not going to fight it, Adrian is. I want you to give the Enduring to him."

"Tomas, I know that I said that Adrian probably could use the chair, but we need to run tests to get him ready."

"I am confident that there will not be any problems. I need you to do this. There isn't much time, the Erasi are about to attack Kaleras, and Adrian and the Shara Daim need help."

"I will do it, Tomas, but you have held this ship a secret for so long. Are you sure?" Isani asked.

"I am," Tomas said resolutely. "I have a message that I want you to give to him, before he takes command of the Enduring."

"Of course, Tomas. I'll see to it."

Tomas nodded and closed the channel. Isani stared at the empty holo for a moment or two before calling his second who was on the Enduring.

"Clan Leader, how may I help you?" his second, a Guxcacul called Rivv, asked.

"Get the Enduring ready for departure. All science teams are to leave immediately, all work is to halt. Make sure that the console interface is operational; I'll be sending several shuttles with supplies immediately."

"Where is it going?"

"To Shara Daim space," Isani said.

"You mean…"

"Yes, just get it ready, we leave as soon as possible," Isani said. "And send a message to Nelus, let them know that a Warpath ship will enter their territory and needs a path to their sun. We are using the Nelus access point."

* * *

Sol

Aileen sat in Gotu's office in Sol and reported her experience from Tarabat. Once she finished, Gotu stood and walked around the table to

stand and look through a vid-screen that showed the outside of Olympus Mons.

“We already knew most of this. We gathered that they didn’t want you to leave and trigger a war before they were ready,” Gotu said.

“Yes, they didn’t even try all that hard to find us. Although it would be near impossible to do so had they tried; there are too many people and different races on Tarabat. And the Erasi are not really in control, it is more a balanced chaos that runs itself. They are only overseers that get involved when someone breaks their contracts,” Aileen said.

“I’m sorry that we didn’t try to find you,” Gotu said remorsefully.

“I understand, you couldn’t have known that some of us survived,” Aileen said. “What do you think about Jurr’s offer?”

“I will relay it to the Lord Sentinel and the Emperor, but I believe that he might get his wish. Clan Leader Isani told me to expect a ship to come to Sol tomorrow, one headed to Kaleras. I am to put as many adepts and Sentinels on it as I can, as reinforcements for Adrian.”

“That includes me?”

“If you want to only. I will not force you just after you came back.”

“No problem, I’m going. Those bastards have to pay for the deaths of my crew.”

* * *

Gotu and Aileen waited in the Olympus Mons command. According to the comms from Sanctuary, the ship that was supposed to make a stop in Sol before heading to Kaleras was about to arrive. As they waited, one of the Adjutants approached Gotu.

“Administrator,” he said, “we are detecting strange readings from the Sun.”

“What kind of readings?” Gotu asked.

“Fluctuations. We are not sure what they mean,” the Adjutant said, and then another spoke out, “Administrator, we are detecting something coming out of the Sun!”

“Show me!” Gotu ordered, and the holo switched to show the Sun, and a massive object lifting out of the Sun’s corona, its shields clearly visible and blazing blue.

“Administrator, we are getting a communication request from the object—it is Clan Leader Isani.”

Gotu glanced at Aileen, his Nel face clearly showing shock.

“I’m guessing that is the ship we were waiting for.”

Interlude IV

A long time ago

Axull looked at the devastation before him in shock and confusion.

"How could they have done this?" Waiss whispered, almost as if he was afraid to speak in the presence of such needless death.

"I don't know," Axull answered.

"We gave them everything, showed them the wonders of the universe. And they… they did this?" Waiss's voice broke at the end.

"They wanted more," Ullax said while holding Waiss's hand.

"What more could they have possibly wanted?" Waiss asked. Axull could feel his friend's pain, could see how betrayed he felt. Axull shared that pain as well. Waiss trembled, his wings curling at his back. "We taught them, we uplifted them—everything that they are is because of us! And they repaid us by doing this!" Waiss pointed at the window and the remains of the World-ship and the combined fleets of three different species spreading in front of them.

"We held things back…" Ullax said.

"Of course we did!" Waiss said. "You don't teach a child the most dangerous things you know! You teach them responsibility, you build on their knowledge over time. Were we supposed to give them the keys to all of our accomplishments? They were not ready, nor are they worthy, as they have just demonstrated."

"Waiss is right, this is not our fault, they made this choice," Axull said.

"We gave them intelligence, brother," Ullax said.

"And they chose to misuse our gifts," Axull argued.

"We need to act now. They cannot be allowed to use what we taught them to harm another of the People," Waiss told them.

"They have lost almost all of their ships in order to destroy the Nova," Axull said. "They are still far behind us."

"Which is why we need to act now. They were always good students, and we have given them too much," Waiss added.

"We will. They will be punished for what they have done, I promise you that, Waiss," Axull said.

"You are not planning on wiping them out?" Ullax asked hesitantly. Among the three of them, she was the one who had been the closest to the three races they had uplifted. They were her children, in many ways.

"No, but they don't deserve what we have given them. If they want to join us as equals, they will have to do it on their own, without us to guide them," Axull said, and turned to look at his attendant

standing behind them. “Tell the command team to get the Enduring underway. We need to reach Aus Alar as fast as possible. And tell them to call every World-ship in the area and order them to meet us there as well,” Axull ordered.

“Right away, Grand Exatt,” the attendant said, and exited the viewing room.

“What are you going to tell the council?” Ullax asked.

“The truth. They are unworthy of what we have given them and need to be struck down,” Axull answered.

“We are going to fight them,” Ullax said, distraught.

Waiss put his arms around her and pulled her close. “They forced us to do this, Ullax. Don’t forget that. We only wanted to help them, and they repaid us with the death of a World-ship. They did not deserve our gifts.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

December; Year 58 of the Empire — Kaleras system

Adrian stood and watched the round holo-table in the middle of the command center onboard the command ship Gallant. The Erasi ships had been coming into the system for several minutes now, and their numbers kept growing. Adrian regretted not attempting to lay a trap for them, but there was just no way for him to have known exactly where they would've exited hyperspace. The Erasi would enter the system unopposed. He was watching them from several monitoring drones that had been positioned all around the system, almost in real time. But what worried him was that they were two days late, according to their calculations. Which could only mean that they had made a short stop somewhere before coming to Kaleras, and he had some idea why that might be.

"That is a lot of ships," Iris said in his head.

"Yeah."

"Think that you can win?"

"There is always a chance."

"Want to know what percentage I give you?"

"No," Adrian scoffed at her mentally.

"Suit yourself," she puffed.

Adrian shook his head and turned his attention back at the holo. He and Anessa had planned the defense as best as they could, but both of them knew that none of their plans would survive the contact with the Erasi. The best they could hope for was to reduce the Erasi numbers enough that they would have difficulties taking the rest of Shara Daim territory quickly, buying time for their industry to build up enough forces to defeat them eventually.

They had also debated whether Anessa should command from the Bloodbringer or the Gallant, but in the end, the Gallant just wasn't feasible. The Empire's command ships didn't have the systems that supported use of telepathy for command, and there was no time for her to learn how to use the Watchtower interface. In the end, they had decided to be on two different ships, with Anessa in the overall command of the defense, as it was her territory and she had the most forces.

Then the Erasi arrivals slowly tapered down, and the computers calculated the final count of the Erasi ships. Two hundred forty-seven thousand six hundred sixty ships, with the auxiliary ships whose presence meant that they planned to stay here until they had taken the system. The Erasi still outnumbered the defenders, but after Adrian's attack, the advantage was smaller. The Shara Daim had

around one hundred thousand warships, with another seven thousand five hundred auxiliary ships, and Adrian had around twenty and a half thousand warships with three and a half thousand auxiliary. Together, they commanded almost one hundred thirty-two thousand ships, but were still outnumbered almost two to one.

The Erasi force started to move deeper into the system, one massive cloud of ships coming to destroy them.

* * *

Anessa watched as the Erasi formation divided, a large portion of it heading towards the fifth planet in the system and its defenses. The station there was mostly warehouses, with a few habitats that were mostly used for making trading deals. But close to the planet were two trans-points, both incoming and both defended. Unlike the Empire, which typically had one massive station as the defense of a point, the Shara Daim had four smaller defense stations surrounding the point. The points must have been a priority for the Erasi; the trans-points were the only reason why one would want to take a hub system.

Anessa started giving orders. Her fleets had been divided and placed strategically across the system, as they hadn't been sure where the Erasi would arrive. She ordered two of her forces, each consisting of ten fleets, to move to support the defenses at the points. The rest of the Erasi formation was moving slowly, almost unconcerned as they moved to take positions above the sun's plane. Then another two formations moved away from the main Erasi force to attack other points of interest in the system and she sent out more orders. The main force even without those three formations numbered almost as much as Anessa's and Adrian's combined fleets. Anessa knew that this was a delicate dance; the Erasi wanted to force her to overextend, allow them to take a large part of her force with overwhelming numbers, and she needed to poke at them and take down their numbers. The Erasi couldn't allow themselves to be caught unaware, so they were going to be moving slowly, working their way through the system destroying any threat and taking control of the trans-points, setting up defenses to prevent any reinforcements that would come behind their back.

Then the first Erasi formation began their attack on the defense stations. The Erasi had launched kinetic projectiles, rocks, at her stations, and Anessa grimaced as she realized that Adrian had been right. The Erasi had a way of dealing with her fixed defenses. The crews of the defense stations tried firing at them, but they were extremely hard to see; the only reason they even knew they were

coming was because they had been watching the Erasi ships and saw them being launched. Then the Erasi ships started firing missiles, which made it even less likely that they would manage to take the rocks down. Her own ships started firing their own missiles, and the stations fired their own.

The space between them was filled with exploding missiles, as both sides' point defenses started taking them down. Her side seemed to have an upper hand, as fewer of the Erasi missiles passed through the combined defenses of the stations and her warships. Then the kinetic weapons hit. Rocks smashed into the stations' shields, illuminating them in bright showers of fire as they broke apart on impact. The stations held for a time, until they didn't. The shields failed and the rocks hit the stations, blowing through them and taking them apart.

Grimly, she gave the order for her ships to start retreating slowly while firing at the Erasi, who were now moving to take the orbit of the planet, destroying the few defensive platforms there and taking possession of the warehouses in orbit.

The second Erasi taskforce was attacking another incoming transpoint and there, instead of taking shots from range, they had pressed their attack, surprising her forces. The Erasi ships surged forward once the stations and the defense platforms were gone, engaging her forces. Her taskforce started suffering losses and she opened a channel to Adrian's ship, asking him to help them. The Empire's fleets and her own First Legion were her best weapons, the only ships in the system that had the skim technology. And she needed to use them wisely. Adrian sent his acknowledgment, and four of his fleets disappeared on their way to help her Legions.

* * *

Four of the Empire's fleets dropped out of skim flanking the Erasi fleets. Immediately, they started firing proton beams and kinetic shells into their flank, forcing them to evade the shower of metal slugs. The Shara Daim ships, seeing a chance, pressed a counterattack, forcing the Erasi to begin a retreat. The Empire and the Shara Daim forces followed them and fired at them until another Erasi force detached from the main force and set a course towards them.

Seeing a much larger force on its way, the Empire and Shara Daim ships turned around, executing a retreat of their own.

Chapter Thirty

Kaleras

A day later, Adrian woke from his short two-hour nap, which was all he generally needed to be rested, and rushed to the command center. Thankfully, nothing major had occurred while he slept; there were a few skirmishes as the Erasi and Shara Daim ships got too close to each other, but other than that, the Erasi had been happy to bombard another trans-point from afar, and secure the points they had captured. Their auxiliary ships obviously included cargo ships, as they had brought defense platforms of their own and had placed them at the incoming trans-points, ensuring that any force coming through them would be met with instant response.

An hour later, the situation changed, as Adrian noticed a very big chunk of the Erasi formation moving, signaling another big push. The fighting until now had gone mostly equal; both had suffered almost equal losses, with the Shara Daim of course losing their defenses at an alarming rate. The new Erasi formation headed towards an area where there were several incoming and outgoing trans-points, and significant defenses protecting both the points and the stations in the area.

Adrian knew that this was going to be the first larger battle of the siege. This was a point where they could hurt the Erasi. And the Erasi knew it. The force they were sending was almost half of their total number, almost equal to the entire defending force in the system. Anessa's orders came through to the Gallant, and Adrian started relaying them to his fleets.

The thing that bothered him the most was that this was the first time that the Erasi's new type of warship was joining the battle. Adrian assumed that that was the flagship of the O'fa. The problem was that they knew very little about its capabilities. From the scans on Numvani, he knew only that their shields were far more powerful than anything that the Empire or the Shara Daim had, that its hull was made of an unknown material, and that it possessed a weapon capable of cutting right through their shields. They weren't sure if any other Erasi ship had those weapons, but so far they hadn't used them, which didn't mean anything.

He had debated with Anessa about sending a couple of skim missiles at it, but it never gave them a clear shot, and Adrian wasn't about to waste a skim missile just to test that ship. Thankfully, only one of the ships had come with the Erasi force, which was a small blessing if that ship was as powerful as Adrian suspected.

Shara Daim forces moved into the protective envelope of the defenses and waited for the Erasi. Like before, the Erasi sent rocks at

the defenses, but this time Anessa's ships and defense stations started taking them down with pinpoint accuracy. Adrian had scattered enough stealth drones around the area that they could triangulate the speed and trajectories of the rocks. The Erasi would need to come into the range if they wanted to take that point.

And they did. A mass of Erasi ships entered the range and started firing missiles, just as the Shara Daim did the same. The Erasi outnumbered the defenses and could put out more missiles, but the advantage of the defense stations and platforms was enough that they were near equal, both taking small losses, but nothing that would break the defense. That is, until a large group of Erasi ships, almost five fleets, among which was the Erasi flagship, started moving forward, while the rest of the Erasi ships adjusted their formation to cover their advance.

The advancing fleets entered energy weapon range and started firing against the defenders. Then a new beam of energy entered the battle. The Erasi super battleships in the formation started firing weapons that pierced right through the Shara Daim's shields. The Erasi flagship fired a ridiculous number of particle beams and their shield-piercing beams that soon enough the defense stations started losing their combat effectiveness. Several stations blew up, and the Shara Daim ships started taking losses.

Adrian received a message from Anessa, and immediately ordered half of his fleet into a skim. Three minutes later, they dropped out above the Erasi formation. His drones and cruisers pelted the space with explosive rounds, forcing the Erasi to evade, and in doing so decreasing the effectiveness of their point defense. Ion and Enforcer missiles followed, as volley after volley of missiles launched from his ships.

The Erasi ships faltered, and with their cover of the advancing fleets nearly gone, the Shara Daim managed to counterattack and force them to slow their advance. Then the Erasi flagship moved into the front, and Adrian saw a chance. He immediately gave orders, and from across the system, five skim nuclear missiles engaged their thrusters and then disappeared into a skim, only to appear several minutes later a mere kilometer away from the Erasi flagship. The missiles covered that distance in a blink of an eye, and a moment later, the space that the Erasi flagship had occupied was engulfed in nuclear fire.

Then as the fire cleared, Adrian watched in amazement and dismay as the Erasi flagship continued moving forward, its shields clearly visible for a second after the blasts before they became invisible again. The ship had survived, and it was undamaged. Emboldened, the Erasi ships surge forward, smashing the rest of the

defenses and forcing the Shara Daim Legions to retreat. Adrian's fleets did the same, moving out of the range of the Erasi as they demolished the remaining defenses and took control of yet another part of the Kaleras system.

* * *

Anessa grimaced as she saw the Erasi flagship survive Adrian's attack. She didn't know of anything else that they had in their arsenal that could do more damage. And the fact that the ship hadn't even lost its shields bothered her. As her Legions retreated towards another defense point, she looked over the reports. She had suffered many losses; almost half of her Legions had suffered light damage, and she had lost almost two Legions' worth of warships. The Erasi, on the other hand, had somehow managed to lose far less, even with Adrian's fleets ambushing them. She glared at the holo. There were still points in the system that the Erasi hadn't taken. She was sure that they would take all other points before they turned their eyes towards the system's main planet. They wanted to surround her, to attack from all sides and destroy her against the planet.

Chapter Thirty-One

December; Year 58 of the Empire — Kaleras

Garash grinned savagely as yet another Shara Daim warship exploded under the onslaught of his devastator. He would've given everything to see the expression on the faces of the Shara Daim's Kar Daim and the Empire's Lord Sentinel once they had seen the End of Hope weather their attack. It appeared that the Empire still had some of their advanced weapons; however, the fact that they had used it only now meant that they must have a limited supply. In any case, he had already implemented safeguards to minimize their potential damage. Those weapons would not be as effective as they had been before.

As the last of the Shara Daim defenses exploded, Garash started issuing more orders, sending several fleets to follow the retreating Shara Daim and harry them as they ran. So far, the invasion was going well; not as easy as he had anticipated, but then, he hadn't yet committed all of his forces to an attack. He was testing their defenses, devising tactics. He was old, and he had learned over his lifetime that to defeat an enemy, you needed to know them. To understand how they would react to different situations, how far you could push them before they broke.

These initial skirmishes were him getting to know his enemy. There were only a few more areas in the system under Shara Daim control, and once those were his, their last stand would begin. And he would break them.

* * *

Adrian watched coldly as one of his dreadnoughts succumbed under the Erasi attacks. Several missiles broke through its shields and energy beams opened its hull, but still the dreadnought fought, refusing to die. The metal melted and parted under the Erasi energy beams, and finally an internal explosion broke the ship apart. So far, Adrian had few losses compared to Anessa and her Legions, who had been taking the brunt of the Erasi attacks. Adrian's fleets had served as a fast and mobile attack force, skimming across the system to strike where they were needed and to change the flow of small battles and overcome the Erasi.

But the Erasi commander had grown smart, and his tactics had changed to prevent him from doing much damage. After the first few times Adrian had caught the Erasi ships at an disadvantage, he had

started sending larger forces, augmented with more super battleships. Adrian ordered retreat as the Shara Daim force was overwhelmed despite his fleet's help. The flow of battle was changing, and he could feel it. The Erasi had started anticipating Anessa's moves, and she was taking too many casualties.

Adrian had lost many ships as well; not whole fleets, but he had lost a majority of his drones, which made the bulk of his forces, and without them, his other ships were more vulnerable. And he was spending his special weapons fast. He had used another three of his skim missiles, as he'd felt the opportunities had been too good to pass up, leaving him down to five. Now after he had used them, he was starting to wonder if maybe the Erasi commander had wanted him to use them. The opportunities were *too* good. He was goaded into spending his best weapons, and the Erasi had sacrificed little in the grand scheme. The Erasi commander was excellent, and no matter how many scenarios Adrian ran through his mind, he couldn't see a way to victory.

The Erasi now controlled all of the system's trans-points, with only one area under Shara Daim control. Anessa had started pulling her forces behind the largest defenses in the system, waiting for the Erasi to come and attack. Adrian ordered his ships to skim to the outskirts of the system, as was the plan Anessa and he had developed. His fleets would add little stationed behind the defenses, so he would attempt to strike at them from behind, taking shots as opportunities presented themselves.

He still had one trump card. Besides five skim missiles, he had around three hundred skim-capable missile pods. They wouldn't be nearly as effective against ships that had their shields active, but they could still be a threat to the Erasi, and one they didn't know about. Adrian looked over the holo as the Erasi formed several formations and started advancing at Shara Daim positions. By moving behind those defenses, Anessa had cut off her means of escape. The Erasi surrounded them now; there wouldn't be an escape for them, not for the ships without skim drives.

He knew why she'd done that. The Erasi needed this system in order to move quickly through Shara Daim territory. They could split their force and send it through trans-lanes to attack several systems at once; they had the numbers. If Anessa had abandoned this system, she wouldn't have had enough Legions to defend them all. If she stopped the Erasi here, if she crippled their fleet enough that their advance was slowed down by lack of ships, then she could win. Her shipyards were building Legions as fast as they could. Eventually, she would be able to throw them out of her territory, especially with the Empire's help.

There was a still small chance of victory, a chance that the Erasi would make a mistake that would allow Anessa and Adrian to retaliate and win. But either way, this battle would be costly on both sides.

* * *

The Erasi assault began with kinetic attacks against the fixed defenses. Anessa watched as the Empire's stealth drones transmitted the locations of the rocks, and the defense stations and defense platforms—both Shara Daim and Empire—fired beams of energy to take them down. Several Erasi formations closed to missile range, sending thousands of missiles towards her defenses, and her Legions responded with their own.

The Legions and the defenses seemed to be getting the better of the exchanges, except that each time an Erasi ship lost shields, they retreated behind the lines and new ones took their place, while the damaged ships moved to the back of the formation so that Erasi repair ships could repair them. So while her forces were inflicting more damage, they were taking more losses. She didn't have enough forces to rotate them around; all were required to hold the Erasi.

With no other choice, she gave orders for several of her formations to leave the protection of the defenses and enter energy range. Legion ships fought and died as they prevented the Erasi ships from retreating, adding their firepower to the defense platforms and stations to destroy them utterly. Quickly, the Erasi shifted formation again, forcing her ships back behind the defenses. The Legions were battered, but they had succeeded; the Erasi had been momentarily pushed back. Anessa saw one of the Erasi formations push too far towards her defenses, leaving their support ships and the small taskforce defending them too far from any other Erasi formation. She opened a channel to Adrian's ship.

* * *

Half of Adrian's remaining fleets dropped out of the skim as close to the Erasi support ships and the forces protecting them. Immediately, they opened fire. Short-range ion beams burned through the Erasi ships' shields, taking them down and allowing for plasma torpedoes to burn through their hulls. The Erasi force protecting the support ships attempted to shield them, but they were caught off guard, and were outnumbered.

Adrian's warships quickly dispatched them, and started a retreat while firing several volleys towards the Erasi back lines, hopefully disrupting them enough to give more breathing room to Anessa. A few Erasi fleets moved to intercept his fleets, but he knew that his skim drives would recharge before they would catch up.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kaleras

Garash studied the battle map. His fleets were making progress taking down fixed defenses, but the Shara Daim had also destroyed many of his ships—too many. Attacking a heavily defended point was always extremely hard, but the Shara Daim were too effective. And Garash couldn't let this battle continue while his forces suffered this rate of losses. He formed a new formation with his most advanced ships, four of the ten fleets that had been equipped with weapons capable of passing through shields, and he put the End of Hope at the formation's point.

Slowly, they moved out of the protective coverage of the rest of the fleets on a course for the Shara Daim defenses. Once the Shara Daim figured out what he was doing, the fire shifted towards his devastator, which shrugged off all of their attacks. The devastator's shields were near impossible to take down, and even if they somehow managed such a task, Garash doubted that the Shara Daim or the Empire had something capable of punching through his ship's hull.

His ships started firing their beams, completely ignoring the Shara Daim shields. Defense stations and platforms exploded, and the Shara Daim were forced to pull more ships from the other sides of their perimeter to attempt to stop him. It wouldn't matter in the end, Garash ordered his ships forward, increasing the pressure, with his devastator leading the push.

* * *

Adrian watched as the Erasi flagship started pummeling Anessa's defenses. She was trying to stop it by pouring more fire into it, even going as far as to pull ships from other sides to help. Yet the flagship didn't even slow, its shields illuminated from the constant attacks but showing no sign of going down.

Adrian saw another chance to take a shot at the large warship. By pulling in front without the cover of the superior numbers, it had made itself vulnerable to his attack. Adrian accessed his c-board and started giving out orders, forming a taskforce to attack the flagship, as well as sending coordinates to the missile pods he had placed outside of the system. The Erasi forces were divided into several formations that surrounded Anessa's position, but there was actually room between them, direct lines of sight where his pods could skim through.

As soon as he finished crafting the orders, he sent the instructions to the pods to go to skim. Adrian sent a message to Anessa, telling her what to expect, and then he waited for his pods to arrive.

* * *

One hundred of the Empire's missile pods exited their skim between the Erasi flagship and the rest of its formation. The sudden appearance and launches from the pods disrupted the Erasi ships' fire and formation as they maneuvered to get into better positions to take down the incredible number of missiles. Their maneuvering isolated the Erasi flagship, and once another fifty pods came out of their skims, it had only its own point defense to protect it.

The Erasi warship's response was immediate and devastating; nearly a fifth of the missile pods were destroyed before they could launch even a single missile, and the missiles that were launched started dying at an incredible rate. But despite that, there were just too many for it to stop them all alone. Ion missiles delivered their powerful shield draining charges at the bottom side of the ship, the Shara Daim taking the opportunity to increase their rate of fire as well and pound its front.

The shields were wavering, but still held, until five skim missiles appeared and slammed into the shields at the exact same. A hole appeared as the Erasi ship's shields collapsed in that section, just as several new arrivals exited the skim. Five hundred of the Empire's drones, followed by five battleships and three dreadnoughts, left the skim close enough to the Erasi flagship that they could fire all of their weapons.

Proton beams and plasma torpedoes left the Empire's battleships and dreadnoughts before the Erasi flagship could even react. Weapons fire bathed the flagship's hull—and did nothing. The Erasi warship retaliated, its energy weapons swathing drones as fast as it could retarget, as the drones fired their kinetic shells and lasers at the flagship's hull.

Powerful shield-piercing beams of energy exited the Erasi warship, targeting two of the Empire's dreadnoughts, and instead of bypassing their shields, the beams were dissipated across the surface of the Empire's warships, doing almost no damage. All of the Empire's warships in the taskforce had their shimmering fields active to counter the Erasi shield-bypassing beams.

The dreadnoughts targeted their k-turrets, firing their kinetic ship killers at the Erasi warship's hull. Nine kinetic shells slammed into the Erasi ship's hull at nearly forty percent the speed of light, transferring

all of that kinetic energy into it. The hull held. But indentations appeared at impact points and small cracks splintered across the hull. Emboldened, the Empire's ships kept firing, but the Erasi warship rolled, forcing them to move with it. Its weapons pummeled the Empire's ships, and two battleships exploded as their shimmering fields failed and the Erasi energy weapons cut their hulls open.

The rest of the Erasi formation finally fought through the pods' missiles and the Shara Daim fire, and came to aid their flagship, forcing the Empire's ships to retreat towards the Shara Daim defense line. A single dreadnought kept with the Erasi roll, keeping up with the barrage of plasma torpedoes and proton beams, firing their k-turrets as soon as they could be recharged. The damage seemed to be increasing, but it was only by a miniscule amount. Then the shields of the Erasi warship flared and the area was covered by the shields again. The dreadnought kept pouring fire into the Erasi warship, but with its shields back up, it was doing nothing. The Erasi warships overwhelmed the dreadnought's defenses and destroyed it.

The Erasi flagship then rejoined the formation and they continued their advance on the Shara Daim defenses.

* * *

Adrian watched as his attack against the Erasi flagship failed. His taskforce had been mangled and he had lost almost all of the five hundred drones he had sent, as well as three battleships and one dreadnought. He didn't consider the attack a complete failure; they had learned that the ship's shields could be taken down, only now he no longer had any skim missiles and was down to one hundred and fifty pods. But the most frightening thing he had learned was about the flagship's hull. He had looked over the scans, and judging by the effectiveness of his weapons, he figured out what that hull was made of.

It was highly compressed matter, something that the Empire had been experimenting on, only on a smaller scale. The factor of compression that the Empire used was small, but this… this was something on another level. The Empire had projects attempting to do exactly what the Erasi had done, but even a small piece of highly compressed matter took a long time and a lot of resources to be made.

That hull was almost immune to anything that either his or Anessa's ships could throw at it. If he'd had more skim missiles, or if he could get a large force of his dreadnoughts to fire their k-turrets at a single spot, they might be able to take it down. However, the Erasi flagship was never too far out of position, and after this attack, it

wouldn’t expose itself again.

Adrian glared at the holo. Seeing Anessa’s defenses falter, the Erasi flagship punched through and made a small opening in the defensive line. Erasi all across the defensive lines started pushing harder; more ships started moving towards the opening, forcing Anessa to weaken other sides to plug that hole. She would hold for a while, Adrian knew, but soon enough the sheer numbers that the Erasi had to throw at her would overwhelm the defenders.

They had lost.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Damage report?" Garash asked.

"Hull integrity is down to seventy-eight percent in sector G-12. The repair crews are on their way to fill the cracks, but that won't hold for long if we get hit at that spot again. Shields over that sector have been restored at half strength; we should have full strength within the hour."

Garash acknowledged the report from his crew, and turned his eyes back to the holo. He felt a stab of pain in his missing arm, which made him angry; the Empire's Lord Sentinel had damaged his ship just as he had managed to cut off his arm. An insignificant pest that had managed to harm him for the third time. He knew that there was little that the Shara Daim and the Empire had that could harm his ship; their best weapons to counter his ship were the Empire's kinetic weapons. And even they were not powerful enough to pose a serious threat. The fact was that he had dismissed their threat on End of Hope; he had not truly believed that they would be able to take down his shields.

The devastator warships were created as an answer to the Krashin threat on their rimward border, whose kinetic weapons were nearly unstoppable. The devastators had shields that were nearly impossible to take down, thanks to the extremely powerful zero-point energy generator that the ship used to power its systems. And if someone somehow managed to take them down, the compressed matter hull would prove a match to any weapon. But the ships were costly; the compressed matter and the ZPE generators were difficult to produce. And then there was the fact that, once damaged, these ships could only be fully repaired in a shipyard in the Erasi core. The Empire had cracked his hull's integrity, and he wouldn't be able to repair it until he went back to the core. And that only served to fuel his anger more.

This Empire and the Shara Daim were not supposed to be this difficult. He had the numbers and the technology to wipe them out, yet they still struggled. He had lost too many ships, almost a third of the force he had brought to this system, and he would lose no more. He ordered the End of Hope forward, his ships following behind as they widened the hole in the Shara Daim defense.

* * *

Anessa's Legions were faltering; the Erasi had destroyed enough of her defenses that they had started overwhelming her ships. She

knew that her Legions would die here while she escaped with the Bloodbringer and the First Legion, as they were the only Legion equipped with skim drives. Her people knew it, too; it had always been the plan, if they couldn't defeat the Erasi. Her people had no problem dying for her, and she did not feel guilt for asking it of them. The worst thing possible for a Shara Daim warrior was to die a pointless death. And their deaths would not be pointless; every Erasi ship that they destroyed was one less to threaten their people.

The Shara Daim needed stability, so Anessa couldn't allow herself to be caught and killed. Her people knew and understood it; they had even shown her more respect for being here and fighting with them. And she would not dishonor them by running before the last possible moment. She would fight with them, and make the Erasi pay for every Shara Daim life they took. The people on the planet they were protecting were the same. All were ready to fight the Erasi once they decided to take the planet. There would be no surrender, no compromise; on Kaleras, they would only find death.

Anessa continued to guide her Legions as the Erasi slowly pushed on all sides and destroyed her ships.

* * *

"They are losing," Iris's voice said in Adrian's head through his implant as she watched the holo through his eyes.

"No, they already lost. The Erasi just had too many ships; we never had a chance," Adrian responded.

"She could still order a retreat; they would lose a lot of ships, but some would reach the hyperspace barrier and escape," Iris said.

"That's not the Shara Daim way. They will fight until death. If Anessa weren't the Kar Daim and if Shara Daim didn't need her rule, she would stay with them."

"The Erasi will still have a lot of ships left," Iris added.

"By the time the last Shara Daim ship is destroyed, the Erasi will have lost around half of the force they came into this system with. Their advance through the Shara Daim territory will be slowed because of it," Adrian told her. *"And if we manage to build enough skim missiles and pods, we will be able to slow them further with my remaining forces. Although those weapons will not be as effective as they were the first time. The Erasi now know about them, and will take precautions; their commander will make sure of it."*

"Lord Sentinel," someone called from his side, and Adrian turned to look at the Fleet Commander of the Seventh Fleet standing beside him.

“Yes, Fleet Commander.”

“We’ve received a comm request from an unknown source.”

“Who is it from?”

“It’s Clan Leader Isani, Lord Sentinel.”

Adrian frowned. There was no way that Isani could be in Kaleras. “Erasi?” Adrian asked.

Fleet Commander shook his head. “Definitely not, we checked. But the signal isn’t Empire or Shara Daim, either. It is coming from just outside of the system.”

“Patch it through here,” Adrian said, and waited. A moment later, the holo of Clan Leader Isani appeared in front of him.

“Adrian,” Isani said calmly, but his hands made a gesture of relief. “I’m not too late, then.”

“Isani, where are you? How?” Adrian asked, perplexed.

“There is no time. If you want to save what is left of the Shara Daim Legions, you need to come to these coordinates immediately. I’ve brought reinforcements,” Isani said, and a set of coordinates came through. Adrian checked and saw that the coordinates were the same as the source of the communication, just outside of the Kaleras system. When he looked back up, Isani continued speaking. “I don’t know if it will work; everything that we know suggests that it will. And we tried to prepare the interface for you from the records from when you used Watchtower—we just don’t know if it will be enough.”

“What are you talking about? What is this?”

“There is too little time to explain, you will find out soon enough. Suffice it to say we have a way of defeating the Erasi force, but we need you here.”

Adrian debated for a moment. He glanced at the Fleet Commander, who had been speaking with several of his officers. “It’s him, Lord Sentinel, as far as we can tell.”

“Alright, we’re coming,” Adrian said, and closed the channel. “Skim the Seventh Fleet to those coordinates. Leave the rest of our fleets here. Relay to Fleet Commander Riggs that he is free to engage if he sees an opportunity.”

The crew executed his orders, and less than a minute later, they entered the skim.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Seventh Fleet dropped out of the skim at the coordinates provided by Isani. Immediately after, their sensors detected an object close to their fleet. The holo displayed the object, and the entire crew looked at it in amazement. It was strangely shaped; its front was pointed and was widening towards the back equally on all six sides, which weren't straight but smooth and curving, until they reached the object's maximum width, and then the back ended in a half sphere.

"Those can't be right," the Fleet Commander said. Adrian glanced to see what he was looking at, and saw the estimated size himself. The object was 168 kilometers long and 76 wide, by the computer's estimates.

"They are right," Adrian said. He recognized the ship from the databases in the sphere, or at least the type. That was a World-ship of the People.

"We are getting another comm request."

"Put it through," Adrian said.

Isani appeared again. "Adrian, you need to come aboard. Get a shuttle and come to this area of the ship." Again, Gallant received coordinates. "I'll meet you at the landing bay," he said, and closed the channel.

"Get a shuttle ready," Adrian said as he hastily walked out of the command center.

"We have a World-ship," Adrian said.

"It would appear so," Iris added.

"And they kept it a secret from me," Adrian said. He wasn't really mad. He knew that there were things that he wasn't privy to. *"If I had known… We could've studied it, had ships built like it. Hell, that ship is capable of building smaller ships on its own."*

"There must be a reason as to why they kept it from you."

Adrian nodded to himself as he reached the shuttle, not even acknowledging the crew. *"Yes, and I know exactly why they kept it a secret,"* Adrian said as the shuttle lifted off.

And he did know why they'd kept it a secret. Tomas and Adrian had spoken at great lengths about the future, about how they would prepare for when they met the enemy of the People. Both had agreed that the Empire had to struggle, to invent new technologies that didn't rely on those of the People. So for Tomas to reveal this ship now meant that something had happened to change his mind, because as soon as he used it, everything would change. The races of the galaxy would learn that the Empire had a weapon in its arsenal that was far more advanced than anything that they had.

The shuttle approached the World-ship and its hull parted in an iris, revealing pale blue light inside. They entered what looked like a strange landing bay, with several different levels, and they made their way to one where people were waiting for them. Once they landed, Adrian stood and exited the shuttle and walked over to Isani, who was waiting for him.

"What happened, Isani?" Adrian asked, forgoing any kind of greeting.

Isani moved his arms in a gesture of great sorrow. "The Erasi attacked Sanctuary, that's what happened. Come," Isani said, and guided him towards a wall with symbols on it. Before Adrian could ask anything, Isani continued, "They sent ten fleets and a new type of stealth ships that we are having difficulty detecting. They killed millions of civilians, Adrian. They targeted the habitats."

Adrian looked at Isani in shock. "Is my mother alright?"

"Yes, she is fine," Isani said. He pressed something on a panel and the wall opened, allowing them to enter. "They were planning on attacking more than Sanctuary," he said as the wall closed behind them and the small cylinder-shaped chamber they were in moved upwards. "We believe that they wanted to inflict as much damage as they could, then move to other systems. Most likely to force us to keep our forces in our territory so that we couldn't send aid to the Shara Daim."

"What happened? Did we fight them off?"

"There was only one fleet in Sanctuary; it wasn't nearly enough to defeat them. But fortunately, Star-Guard One station was operational, only it came in range after the Erasi executed their attack. We made them pay for it, though some escaped. We are trying to find them, but their numbers are too few for them to be able to continue with their plans, so we suspect that they are retreating back to either a staging point or back to Erasi space."

"Why did Tomas decide to reveal this ship?" Adrian asked.

"He is angry, Adrian. They hit Sanctuary, where we thought we were the strongest," Isani said.

"Why didn't you just join the battle? Why have me come here?"

"We can't fight this ship; we are hoping that you can."

"Why me?"

"The ship uses something akin to the Watchtower interface, only much more powerful. Our people have been able to use it for minutes only, and even then, they can't really do much with the ship."

"How did you get it here, then?"

"We have been able to access some commands by attaching consoles to the main computer, but it is all too advanced. We can just move the ship, and even that is a nightmare to calculate and send the

instructions to the computer."

"So you think that I can use it?" Adrian asked.

"You are a special case. Your mind is capable of bearing much larger load than the mind of an ordinary human or Nel. We are hoping that it is enough, though we won't know until we try."

The cylinder was suddenly flying through the air, and before him was a massive, sprawling city.

"And there is this, too." Isani drew his attention back from the marvelous city. "Tomas wanted me to show you this before you took command of the Enduring."

"The Enduring? This is Axull Darr's ship?"

"Yes," Isani said as he pressed a button on a palm-sized disk. Tomas's hologram appeared in front of him, projected from the small device.

"Adrian," Tomas said, "I am sorry for keeping this ship from you. I thought that we needed to struggle, that conflict was a part of that; I didn't want us to become dependent on this technology. But I am, as it seems, not cut out to be so ruthless. The Erasi have attacked, killed my people, even after all that we have done to prevent a war. They believe that their strength gives them the right to do as they please, and I have come to realize that perhaps they are right. Might is the only thing that matters in this universe. If you want to be safe, you need to make sure that all understand what will happen if they decide to move against you." Tomas's image closed its eyes. "I need you to do this. I want you to make sure that the Erasi understand exactly what they have done. The Enduring is yours. Make sure that the Erasi, and any who would follow their example, never again do something like this." The hologram disappeared, and Isani put the device back in his pocket.

"Well…" Adrian said. Isani didn't respond. A minute later, they reached their destination. They stepped out and onto what looked like a makeshift control room. Stations and consoles familiar to him were placed against the walls, with cables stretching from them to the center of the room. Several people were in the process of disconnecting those cables from an ornate blue-and-black chair that was made of thousands of thin, smooth branches that spiraled and melded together.

Isani walked forward. "Are you finished?"

One of the workers pulled a cable and turned to look at Isani. "Yes, this was the last one."

"Good," Isani said, and he turned to Adrian. "Sit there."

Adrian walked a few steps to the chair and sat down.

"Once you put your arms here"—Isani pointed to the two armrests and two small globes that were perfectly positioned for him

to rest his palms on—“you will activate the chair. What everyone who used this before you told us is that you need to focus at what you want. They only ever managed to gain the controls for propulsion, and even that was hard.”

“How does it feel?” Adrian asked.

“One of our testers said that it feels like you are sinking into the ship.”

“Here I go,” Adrian said, and put his palms on the two globes. In an instant, the world exploded inside his mind.

Chapter Thirty-Five

They had been wrong. It did not feel like sinking into the ship, it felt as if his body had been turned to liquid and was seeping into every recess of the World-ship. It kept going, stretching his body to fit everything, every part of the ship. For a moment, it threatened to overwhelm him, and then it was over—he was everywhere. Then the sensations came. He could feel everything inside the ship. He was the ship. Millions of things tugged at his attention, but he focused, calmed his mind. There was only one thing that interested him. He needed to take this ship to battle.

Almost as if the ship heard him, knowledge appeared in his mind, everything about the ship that he would need to know in order to take it into battle. The world around the ship blossomed and he saw it all, the ship's sensors letting him see the battle in real time from so far away using sensors that neither the Empire or the Erasi had ever even conceived of. The Shara Daim ships were losing badly, and he needed to help them.

He pulled back, enough that he could open his body's eyes and turn to look at Isani, who was studying him in consternation.

"I'm in control, and I'm taking us to battle," Adrian said, then went back into the ship without waiting for a response.

A skim field formed around the Enduring, far more efficient than the primitive copy of the technology that the Empire used. In the blink of an eye, the massive ship entered a skim, moving so fast that the trip that took an Empire ship several minutes was over in six seconds.

The Enduring dropped out of the skim between the Erasi and the Shara Daim forces. There was no energy discharge to cripple the systems of the ships around the Enduring; the People had long ago found a way to eliminate that effect.

Adrian located Anessa's ship immediately, and opened a channel to send her a short message. The Enduring's computer generated a hologram of him that she would have no way of knowing wasn't actually him. As soon as the message was off, he turned his attention to the Erasi warships. Their missiles and energy weapons were targeting his ship, and were vanishing harmlessly against his shields.

Enduring's eight and only weapon turrets materialized around its hull. Within moments, Adrian fired. A beam of harsh light left each of the turrets, swiping across the Erasi formations, disintegrating every ship it came in contact with. It was using a far more advanced version of the weapon that the Star-Guard stations fired, a weapon that those stations needed the power of the sun to generate, and which the Enduring powered from its six singularity cores.

The Erasi ships had no chance.

* * *

Anessa watched her Legions die. She had lost almost seventy percent of her forces, and the rate at which her Legions were destroyed only increased as the difference in numbers grew. She had hurt the Erasi badly, but not nearly enough to stop their advancement into Shara Daim territory. She looked over the holo, wondering if it was time to skim her Legion out of the fight, when a new contact appeared on her holo.

A massive object had just appeared in between her and the Erasi formations. Anessa looked at it in a confusion. For a moment, she thought that it was an Erasi ship, but then the Erasi started firing at it.

“Kar Daim, we have an incoming communication from that object. It’s a video message,” Garaam told her.

“Put it on.”

The holo changed and Adrian stood before her. “Anessa, the Empire has sent reinforcements,” he said, a small smile curling on his lip. “Pull your Legions back. I promise you, the Erasi will not leave this system alive.”

Anessa looked at the frozen image of Adrian for a moment before it cleared and showed the battle again. She was about to order her crew to open a channel with the object when Erasi ships started disappearing from her holo.

* * *

Garash looked in satisfaction at the destruction of the Shara Daim ships. He relished in the carnage. He had lost more than half of his total force, but he still had enough to destroy the Shara Daim, and then turn to the Empire. The only thing he couldn’t give them was time; he needed to do it faster than they could rebuild their forces. Which would be a bit more challenging with the number of ships he had, but he would do it. He had fought wars like this one for a long time.

A new contact appeared on his holo, a massive thing that dwarfed every other ship in his fleet, even his devastator. Immediately, he realized that it could only be something from the Empire; they were the only ones that had the technology to travel in FTL through normal space. He gave the order to every single one of his warships to open fire on the object, hoping to prevent whatever the Empire had

planned. Missiles were redirected, and energy beams fired, and all disappeared against the object's shields. A large portion of his force was putting all of their firepower into it, and it was doing nothing. The amount of fire was enough that even the End of Hope's shields would've succumbed by now.

And then the object fired. Beams of light and energy cut through his fleet, destroying thousands of ships with each swipe. The beam would fire for several seconds, swiping across the field of ships, before going silent, only to fire again barely ten seconds later. His ships were being destroyed, engulfed by the wide beams, and nothing that they sent against it was doing any damage.

Garash ordered his ship forward, getting in range, and fired a beam that would bypass their shields—only it didn't. It, like everything else they were firing at the monster, was ineffective. Garash's mind went blank; there was nothing that he could think of to change the situation. His fleets kept disappearing of his holo-table, and there was nothing that he could do to stop it.

* * *

The Enduring's beams kept firing, disintegrating the Erasi fleets. Their flagship closed the range and fired its shield-piercing beam, but did not matter, there was nothing that they possessed that could penetrate the Enduring's shields. The Enduring's scanners penetrated into every part of the Erasi flagship, and Adrian learned exactly what it was made of, and how powerful it was. It was actually impressive, as according to the Enduring's databases, their compressed armor was fairly advanced. Only not nearly as advanced as that of the World-ship.

Adrian left the flagship alone. He could've destroyed it easily enough, but he knew that the O'fa, as the commander of the Erasi ships, had to be on board that ship. And there were the levy ships that were technically part of the Erasi, although their numbers had been cut down by Anessa's defenses. The Erasi had sent them into battles where they needed more numbers and not necessarily more firepower, and because only a small percentage of them were actually technologically on par with the Erasi ships of the line, they had taken heavy losses. He debated destroying their ships as well, but then decided that it would be better for them to get away and spread word of what happened.

Every Erasi ship was now retreating and trying to escape. Adrian noticed a few back elements of the Erasi, several thousand ships, had actually gotten pretty far while he had been destroying those that had

stayed. He pointed the Enduring above their formations and skimmed there in an instant. In less than a minute, he had destroyed all of them. He turned the ship back, and skimmed to another group that had also gotten pretty far, and after dealing with them, he turned back to the Erasi flagship. There were no more Erasi ships of the line in the system; he had wiped them all out. The levy ships were running away, but he would be able to catch them. For now, he needed them to carry a message for him.

The Erasi flagship, on the other hand, would not leave this system. Again he skimmed, putting the Enduring above the Erasi flagship, which just stood there without attempting to fire. It struck him how big it had seemed from Gallant, and how small it looked from the Enduring. He opened a channel to the Erasi ship, the Enduring generating a hologram of Adrian under his guidance.

A moment later, Adrian could see the Erasi O'fa in his mind, and the O'fa could see him.

"You," the O'fa said with contempt.

"Me," Adrian said calmly. "I just wanted to know why."

"Why what?"

"Why so much death and destruction? We could have prospered together, in friendship, in peace. And you threw everything just because you were worried that we could become a threat in the future?"

The O'fa snorted in amusement. "Thriving in peace is not possible. Eventually, one side will always turn on the other. It is inevitable; the only way to survive is by conquering and making sure that your 'friends' never grow enough to be a threat to you."

"You really believe that?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, there is no other way. My people believed differently once, long ago, but we know now that strength is the only thing that can keep you safe."

"The Erasi will need to change that stance, if they want to survive," Adrian said. "If I let you go, would you convince the rest of the Erasi to abide by my terms and have peace?"

"No," the O'fa said, showing his teeth. "That ship of yours tells me exactly how big of a threat you are to us. The others will see it as well; they might agree to whatever you demand, but they will always be searching for a way to surpass you."

"You could've lied to save yourself," Adrian commented.

"There is no point now, you were never going to let me go," the O'fa said.

"No, I was not," Adrian said. He closed the channel, and then fired a beam that engulfed and destroyed the Erasi warship.

Adrian recorded another message and sent it to every levy ship

that was running; they were going to deliver his message. Then he started skimming across the system, destroying every Erasi defense platform at the trans-points before he finally let go of the Enduring's control systems and returned to his body.

Interlude V

A long time ago

"I can't believe that the council wants to try again," Waiss said to Axull Darr as the two of them and Ullax walked through the corridors of the council building on Aus Alar, the homeworld of the People.

"We made mistakes last time. This time, we will not involve ourselves so closely," Axull said.

"The races that we uplifted turned against us, Axull," Ullax said.

"They were children, they weren't mature enough to handle what we had given them. This time, it will be different," Axull responded.

"I'm more worried about the other part of their plan," Waiss said.

"I agree that it might be too intrusive, but it has a large chance for success because of it," Axull said.

"They want us to put life on the same path as us; we would be overwriting anything that their natural evolution would come up with," Ullax added.

"I agree that it seems too intrusive, but we won't be copying our genetic code, we would just put parameters into the code of emerging primitive life that evolution will follow. We know that our forms are adaptable and suitable for everything that an advanced lifeform needs," Axull said.

"No matter how much room we allow them for mutations and natural evolution, they will have features similar to ours," Ullax argued.

"I think," Waiss interjected, "that is the point. They think that life similar to us might also be more accepting of us."

"And yet they still want us to continue with alterations of more advanced lifeforms," Axull said.

"So when we are finished, half of the galaxy will look like us, and the other half will be unique," Waiss said. "I wonder what they will think when they figure out how unlikely it is for two races to evolve in similar ways, let alone more than that," Waiss laughed.

"It will also take far longer for those lifeforms that we alter in stage one to reach intelligence than it will take life that was already stage two when we alter them," Ullax said.

"It will be a good opportunity to study different evolutions," Axull said. "We will be able to see how their environments shape their technology."

"And if this experiment turns out like our last one?" Waiss asked.

"We will not be guiding them directly this time, we won't share our technology with them. They won't be able to harm us this time," Axull said.

No one spoke after Axull. All three were thinking back on the three races that they had uplifted. They had given them technology, taught them how to use it, guided them to the stars. And for that, their wards had turned against them. Their punishment had been severe; all of their technology had been destroyed, and all of their people taken back to their homeworlds and left there.

Axull knew that the years after their punishment had been hard for the three races; the People had been monitoring their progress. One of the races had tried to appeal to the People, for generations, until so much time had passed that they had even forgotten most everything about the People and the time they had spent in space. The only thing that remained were legends about a time when they had been great, but had committed a horrible crime and were cast down. Their society had turned to worship what they perceived as a force of power in the universe, the People. Their progress had been almost nonexistent. Another had turned to anger, had warred against each other. They had splintered into many factions, each blaming the others for going with the plan to turn against the People. They had been fighting for so long that they had even forgotten the reason for their fighting, but they had started technological progress. The last race, the Alphas, the first to be uplifted, had turned to a different path. They had accepted their guilt, and were pushing themselves to reach space again in order to make amends. Already they had been sending primitive communications into space, asking for forgiveness and a chance to make things right. The People had ignored them and gave no sign that they had received their communications.

Axull wondered if their new project would end in the same way as their last one. He knew that this time they wouldn't allow the uplifted races access to their advanced technology. Everything they achieved would be on their own. Perhaps that would make the difference.

Chapter Thirty-Six

January; Year 59 of the Empire — World-ship Enduring

"This is spectacular," Anessa said as she and Adrian walked through the empty city on what Adrian had told her was called a World-ship, a ship that had once been the home to their ancestors, the People.

"It is," Adrian told her, as a bulbous shape with many tentacle-like appendages flew past them. "It just shows you how much they truly were ahead of us."

Anessa agreed. Everything that she had seen from this ship was amazing; it was unlike anything she had ever seen or even imagined. Adrian had taken the Enduring to every system in Shara Daim territory that was under Erasi occupation and they had destroyed the invaders. Now only a few systems were still under their control, and they were on the way to the next one. This ship had much faster hyperspace drives than the Shara Daim or the Empire, and with their skim drives, they could cover a lot more ground than they would've been able to do in a ship of the Legion.

"So, what do you think?" Adrian asked her.

"About?"

"My plan."

"Ah… It is a good plan. I don't think that it will work as you think it will, but a good plan."

"What part of it do you think won't go as I think it will go?" Adrian asked.

"The one where the other races just accept the change," she answered.

"They will have a choice in the matter. It's not like I will force them to stay," Adrian said defensively.

"What kind of a choice is it? The Erasi will not care for them, probably won't even allow them to come with them, and those that do stay will just be spying on us for them. They have nowhere else to go."

"We will deal with it once we come to it. I am confident that we can do this."

"I'm not arguing with you, Adrian," Anessa said with a smile.

"Fine. What about your people's part in it?"

"We are willing, we want to change. I will make sure that we abide by the accord, although I doubt that many will actually believe us."

"They'll learn in time. It will take an effort for you to change their perception of you."

Anessa huffed in agreement and they continued walking. They

walked for what seemed another hour in silence, just enjoying each other's company. Ever since the battle, Adrian had seemed more… approachable. He spent more time with her. She had realized that he had been worried about her, that she would die. It made her feel nice to be wanted, to know that if she was to die, someone would miss her.

She hadn't begun her relationship with Adrian because of affection, but she had come to care for him, even love him.

"Here we are," Adrian announced, snapping her out of her musings.

"Here where? I was not aware that we were going somewhere," Anessa said.

"Come," he said, and led her up a series of steps to a large balcony with a structure built on it. He approached and entered the building, pulling Anessa inside with him. She was surprised to see that the interior was furnished, and in what seemed like a mix of Empire and Shara Daim styles.

"I thought that buildings weren't furnished, that the maintenance units had everything recycled?" Anessa asked.

"They did, but when I am in the chair, I can adjust their orders. I had them furnish this housing unit. I had to upload the records of appliances and furniture from my implant so that the ship could fabricate them," Adrian said, looking around. "We will be spending a lot of time on this ship, I think, and the temporary quarters that Isani had built are not really all that comfortable. And I know that you can't really get a good night's sleep there; you're not used to human-sized beds," he said with a smile.

"So this is for us?" Anessa asked.

"Yes," Adrian said, turning to face her. "And most importantly, the bed is Shara Daim sized," he said mischievously as he grabbed her hand. "Come and see."

Smiling, Anessa followed him upstairs.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

January; Year 59 of the Empire — Tarabat

Valanaru sat in the sanctum of her devastator, Sojourn to the Stars. She had been trying to figure out a course of action ever since she'd learned of the events in the Kaleras system. Even now, after all the records she had seen from the ships that had escaped—or rather, were allowed to escape—there were moments when she just couldn't really believe it. Garash was dead, one of the oldest Erasi, one of the founders. And the Empire was not at all what it had appeared to be. The technology that that ship possessed was something no one in the Erasi had ever seen before, something that they couldn't fight.

And the message that the Empire's Lord Sentinel had sent to be delivered to her had told her exactly what that ship would do if she didn't agree with his 'request.' Her meditation didn't seem to provide an answer, and she had been unable to go into a deep meditation since her encounter with the two mindbenders. Her mind was filled with emotions that she didn't know how to deal with, and the only thing she could do was to seal them away in a corner of her mind, but still sometimes her control slipped and the emotion and memories came back. It was a horrible thing, and an attack unlike anything she had ever seen before.

But she had more important things to worry about—chiefly, the Lord Sentinel's demand. On the surface, it seemed insane, and everything that made her an O'fa screamed that it must be refused. But the part of her that had battled against the Lord Sentinel, and had seen what had happened to Garash, told her that to refuse was to sign the death sentence for the Erasi.

The demand required the Erasi to pull out of this galactic arm, all of their territory forfeited to the Shara Daim and the Empire. All of the Erasi members would have to move back to their territory towards the core; any lower member that wished to remain would be allowed to do so, and would then fall under the rule of either the Shara Daim or the Empire. But all of the main members' assets were to be relocated.

It was unthinkable to think that a small empire could demand such a thing of the Erasi, but they did have the power to back up their demands. But no matter what decision she made, she would have to answer to the council of O'fas, both for her and for Garash's failure. The loss of his fleets would be felt on the Krashin border, and they would need to reinforce it somehow.

A mental presence poked at her mind, and Valanaru turned towards it. **"What is it?"**

“It is here.”

Valanaru sighed and stood, walking out of her sanctum and towards the command center of her devastator. A few minutes later, she stepped onto the command center and approached the holo-table, and then she waited for them to contact her. Several minutes later, they got the request for a channel, and Valanaru accepted.

The hologram of the Empire’s Lord Sentinel appeared before her.

“O’fa Valanaru,” the Lord Sentinel said. “I see that you have recovered well from our encounter.”

“I have, Heart of the Mountain,” she said.

“You called me that before. Why?” Lord Sentinel asked.

“It is the way of my people. When a powerful telepath sees into the mind and soul of another, when they experience their inner-mind and find them worthy, they give them a name that reflects what they have seen,” Valanaru said.

The Lord Sentinel stared at her for a moment before finally speaking. “Have you made a decision?”

Valanaru looked at the Lord Sentinel, seeing his calm and collected pose. She remembered her battle with him; she remembered his inner-mind. She decided. “I have. The Erasi will do as you ask; we will sign your accord and leave these territories.”

“Very good, O’fa, a smart choice. I expect the preparations to begin immediately. Our ships will be coming in to… aid you in your move.”

“Until we meet again, Heart of the Mountain.”

* * *

Four months later — April; Year 59 of the Empire — Sanctuary

“The Erasi are beginning their withdrawal,” Seo-yun said. “It will take years, and I doubt that it will go as smoothly as we think, but Adrian’s plan seems to be working.”

Tomas’s response was only a grunt.

“What is it? You have been acting strange,” Seo-yun said.

Tomas sighed. “I was so angry, Seo-yun, and I felt so much guilt. I wanted them to know that we had the power to defend ourselves.”

“That was the right decision, Tomas.”

“The Erasi might have agreed to Adrian’s demands, but it is because they have nothing that can match the Enduring. That doesn’t mean that they will forget. They might fear us, but they will push themselves to catch up and overcome us now. Every race that learns of what happened will fear us, and all will be looking for something that they can use against us. No one likes someone else holding all the

power."

"They will not catch up to the technology of the People anytime soon. We have their knowledge and we are still struggling to catch up," Seo-yun said. "You have nothing to worry about."

Tomas smiled and nodded, but he knew that what she said wasn't true. The technology of the People wasn't infallible; Tomas had read through many of their records, and he knew that a World-ship had been destroyed by races that did not possess the same level of technology as the People. Three races that they had uplifted had joined and struck at the People. His fears were not unfounded.

Nevertheless, in the end, he had made a decision, and now he needed to live with it. Everyone in the Empire was going to live with it.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

October; Year 59 of the Empire — Erasi core

O'fa Valanaru walked into the council chamber of the O'fas, and walked to the podium in the middle. Directly in front was the current Voice of the Council, another O'fa.

"Weaver," the Voice said, "you have been called before the council to answer for your actions in the Narad sector."

"You have had the chance to see my reports?" Valanaru asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know the Empire has demonstrated far superior technology and might. Refusal of their demands would've meant a complete loss of all our assets in Narad and perhaps more," Valanaru said.

"You gave the Narad sector to them. An entire sector; that is a loss of a great deal of resources," the Voice said.

"It was preferable to the alternative."

"None of our early reconnaissance suggested such a level of technology from the Empire."

"I believe that their ship was the only piece of such advanced technology that they possess. The rest of their technology, while certainly advanced, is not up to par with that ship."

"Do you have any evidence that confirms your suspicions?" the Voice asked.

"Only a few snippets and bits of memories I got from the Empire's Lord Sentinel's mind. In the end, it doesn't matter; we have nothing that could match them now," Valanaru said.

"So we abandon Narad, abide by their accord, and bow our heads in fear," the Voice said.

"For now, yes," Valanaru said.

"What guarantee do we have that they will not attack?" the Voice asked.

"I believe that as long as we abide by the accord I signed, they will not act."

"And we are supposed to allow them to keep growing more powerful?"

"I have some plans, a few of which have already been set into motion. Their taking over of the Narad sector will not go as easily as they think it will," Valanaru answered.

"I assume that nothing can be traced back to us?"

"Of course not, I have been doing this for a long time."

"Good," the Voice said. "We have another problem. Because of Garash's failure, our rimward border is weakened. The Krashin will

notice if we do not reinforce it soon."

"We can send ships that we had stationed in Narad sector, augment them with levies."

"Those ships will not hold for long if the Krashin decide to test us again."

"They only need to hold long enough for us to replace our losses. I suggest that we reactivate the shipyards."

"That will cost us," the Voice said.

"It is inevitable. We need to rebuild, and we need to invest in researching new technologies. Our scientists already have an idea on how the Empire's FTL drives work; we will need to start testing soon."

"And what about their ship? Do we have any idea on how its weapons work?"

"Ideas? Of course. Whether they are right or not, we shall see. But I wouldn't worry, the Empire seems to be willing to give us time, and technology never truly remains a secret. It is only a matter of time before we catch up."

"Very well, Weaver," the Voice said, "the council is giving you the lead on this matter. Hopefully you will not make the same mistakes as O'fa Garash."

"Thank you, I will not fail."

Epilogue

World-ship Everlasting

Ullax Darr woke to darkness and a slow return to consciousness. Her eyes gazed blankly at the dark ceiling above her for several minutes before her mind caught up to the fact that she was awake. Slowly she attempted to sit up, but her old body refused her, so it took her several minutes before she managed to swing her legs over the side of the stasis bed. She reached out with her mind—ignoring the sharp pain caused by that action—and turned on the lights in the room. The three other beds in the room were empty, as they had been for a long time. Ullax was the last of her kind, the last of the People.

Sluggishly, she got to her feet, holding on to the bed for support. Her legs ached with pains from the stasis sleep and from old age and the illness that had killed her people. With a thought, she prompted the computer and checked the status. Immediately, she noticed that she had been woken ahead of the schedule.

"Why was I awoken?" Ullax asked raspingly. Even talking was hard for her now.

"An anomaly was detected, Grand Exatt," answered the station's AI, its voice seeming to come from everywhere around her at the same time.

"What kind of an anomaly?" Ullax asked. She only had a few precious years of life left, and could not afford to lose them on things that did not require her attention.

"An access point in grid 19-31 has been used. The signature matches that of the World-ship Enduring," the station's AI answered her.

For a moment, Ullax's heart stopped. The Enduring was the World-ship of her twin brother, who she had believed dead for a long time. Yet the Enduring couldn't be used by anyone not of the People, and only Axull could've used it; there were no others of her kind left. Pain, old and yet still fresh as on the day they'd parted, came back to her. Their disagreement over the way to combat the three had forced them apart, and it was one of the great regrets of her life. Axull had disagreed with her plan; she had wanted to contain the Enlightened and their abominations, hoping to find a way to defeat them someday, but the price she was willing to pay for containing them was terrible, and her twin hadn't wanted to be a part of it. He'd left, trying to find another way. Now Ullax wondered if her brother was still alive, and if she would have a chance to make amends.

"Prepare a scout group, send it to the last used access point and find the Enduring. I want to know if my brother is still alive."

* * *

Enlightened territory

The three woke from their hibernation to instant clarity. The cocoons holding them slowly opened and allowed three strange figures to step out into the small round room. One of the figures had a lithe body similar in shape to that of a female of the People, with dark orange-tinted skin, except that she had six horn-like growths on her back that curved to the sides and two on top of her head that curved backwards and framed her long, flowing black hair. The second figure was large and beastly-looking, with an elongated snout filled with sharp teeth, six large upper limbs and four legs, with its entire body covered in a scale-like fashion. The third appeared similar to the male of the People, with large wings on his back, and black carapace covering his important areas.

All three walked towards the center of the room. And the being that had once long ago been called Waiss—and now answered to Aranis—approached the circular table that had started growing out of the floor in the center of the room, and sat in the chair that had finished its growth just as he reached it. His large wings furled behind his back and he leaned forward, placing both of his arms on the table. The contact made a connection with the living-ship they were on, and he started soaking up information dumps about the time they had spent hibernating.

Loranis took a seat at his left, her small, lithe body settling into the chair. Aranis looked at her for a moment. Once, when he had been something less, her naked form might have aroused something, but now when gender held no real meaning to them, it was insignificant. Any of the three could alter their forms in minutes if they so wished, becoming whatever they desired to be.

Doranis knelt on his four legs on his side of the table. No chair was grown for him, as he didn't need it. Aranis immediately noticed that he had changed the color of his scales yet again, now to yellow with black accents. As all three finished receiving the information from the ship, they turned to look at each other.

"She is awake again." It was Loranis who voiced what all of them already knew. Each of them had sensed Ullax waking from stasis from thousands of light years away through the Sha. Their connection to the Sha was considerable, even in their hibernation.

"Our forces have not increased pressure. Whatever the reason for her waking before schedule, it is not us. Could her AI have discovered something that could help them to fulfill their programming?" Doranis asked.

"Possible. Whatever it was, it must've been something important

enough for her AI to deviate from schedule; she has very little life left in her," Loranis answered, her hands still on the table. Aranis felt her take hold of the Sha around them, then reach and meld with Doranis and himself. Then, using the amplifier of the ship, she spread their minds across the galaxy. **"I feel no buildup of machine forces,"** Loranis sent. **"And there don't appear to be any primitive races close to Ullax's containment; it doesn't appear that she is using them again."**

"Of course not, she learned her lesson the last time they attempted that. They are far too primitive; when given advanced technology, they will always turn against her," Doranis sent back.

Aranis felt Loranis begin to withdraw from the connection. Then she froze, and her face took on a confused look. **"I feel something…"** Loranis sent, and she dived deeper, focusing her mind at a smaller region. **"That is impossible."**

Doranis's beastly head rose up in bemusement. **"That can't be, they are all dead!"**

Aranis too was confused. What he felt shouldn't have existed. **"They feel like the People,"** he sent.

"They cannot be, only Ullax remains," Loranis added. **"The last time we were awake, they hadn't been there."**

"There are so many of them," Doranis added, a bit dazed. A glimmer of something passed through him, too fast for Aranis to identify it. **"More than there ever were of us."**

"More than there ever were of the People," Loranis corrected.

While Loranis and Doranis were caught up in their shock, Aranis looked deeper, comparing what he was sensing to his memories. **"No, they are different than the People. And there are… three distinct signatures, similar in fashion, but apart,"** Aranis sent.

"Yes, I see it now," Loranis agreed.

"There is something else," Doranis added. **"Their taste, they feel like—"**

"Like Axull Darr," Aranis finished.

"But how? He has been dead for a long time, we felt him die and pass through the Sha," Loranis asked.

"Axull always was brilliant," Aranis answered. **"Now we know why he split off from the rest."**

"So this was his solution for us. I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted. He created new races based on his genome to fight us," Loranis sent as she pulled them back from the amplifier. It could not be used for long periods without damaging them.

"Their connection to the Sha is the same as that of the People, the same as ours," Doranis said.

"In the end, it won't matter; we have moved beyond the

technologies and understandings of the People. Even if these children match the People, we will not be stopped," Loranis said.

"We shouldn't wait any longer," Doranis said stubbornly.

"The consensus was reached long ago, Doranis; to break from it now is to descend into the same anarchy that plagues the rest of the galaxy," Loranis said adamantly. "And we are not like the rest of them."

Doranis bared his teeth and hissed, showing the more beastly nature that he had gained when the lifeform they'd created had merged with him. "Every moment that we wait, we waste our resources holding back Ullax's machines; we lose far more by keeping this balance than we would if we showed our true strength."

"The consensus still holds, you agreed to it," Loranis added, unmoving.

"Two votes are required to change any consensus; if you change your vote and agree with me, the consensus will be broken and a new one put into place," Doranis tried to convince Loranis.

Loranis glanced at Aranis, who had kept silent during the exchange, still thinking on the people his once best friend had created. Then she looked back at Doranis. "Every decision until now has been made by the agreement of us all, and I will not make this one the first where we break with consensus. Especially not when I agree with Aranis."

Doranis hissed in anger and turned to look at Aranis, who met his gaze levelly. "Why do you persist in entertaining this emotional stance? We have abandoned who we once were; there is no point in your sentimentality."

"Whatever we are now, Doranis, we are not monsters. There are reasons behind our actions and goals. I am more than I once was, but I am still me. Ullax is the last of the People, the first intelligent life in this galaxy, and she deserves our respect. Her life will soon come to an end, and then we shall correct the mistakes that the People made. A few thousand years more will not change anything," Aranis responded calmly.

"The only reason I agreed to this waiting was because they did not have long left to live. If I had foreseen that they would prolong their lives by going into stasis, I would never have agreed to your suggestion," Doranis said angrily.

"Yet, we have reached consensus, Doranis. The mistakes that the People made—that we made—will be corrected after Ullax dies," Loranis said firmly.

"Both of you have absorbed the data collected during our hibernation," Doranis said. "You know what is happening beyond Ullax's machines. More and more races are emerging; their numbers

have tripled since the last time we were awake, and the dimensional barriers are weakening faster than before. We need to purge them now!"

"That is true, but it will still take a long time for the effects to become hazardous. Ullax will die long before that comes to pass. We have time," Loranis added.

"I don't even need you. I could take my forces and crush her containment," Doranis said.

The temperature in the room suddenly plummeted to the point that frost gathered on the table as Aranis turned to look at Doranis. "You try to end her life before it is her time, and I will send my Juggernauts against your forces. And then, I will kill you," Aranis promised.

Doranis bared his teeth and grabbed hold of the Sha, and Aranis flexed his wings in preparation for battle, when another force slammed into both of them, keeping them in place.

"Don't," Loranis sent, hammering the thought deep in their minds.

Both Doranis and Aranis flinched at the intensity, and released the Sha.

"Fine," Doranis said, backing down, "I will stand aside, but as soon as she is dead, there will be no more delays. And what of these people that feel like Axull Darr?"

Aranis looked at the two. "I shall go and see what they truly are."

"You won't be able to take any force beyond the machines without Ullax noticing it," Loranis said.

"I don't plan to," Aranis said. "I will go alone, walk among them and learn what Axull's plan is."

"You think them important enough for you to go by yourself?" Doranis asked, surprised.

"I respect my once best friend's capabilities. I want to see his progeny with my own eyes," Aranis answered.

"Again with your irrational need for sentiment," Doranis said, disgusted.

"I am who I am, Doranis," Aranis said.

"Then it is decided," Loranis said. "Doranis and I shall keep the borders and make sure that our project is on track, while you travel to these new races' space and find more about them."

"If Ullax dies before you come back, I will not wait," Doranis said.

Aranis kept his eyes locked with Doranis for a moment. "Agreed. Once Ullax passes through the Sha, we will begin the purge."

*** ***END*** ***

Glossary

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Empire

Adrian Farkas-Reiss — Human; Lord Sentinel of the Empire; Dal A'sha to Kar Daim Anessa of the Shara Daim.

Tomas Klein — Human; Emperor of the Empire.

Seo-yun Hyeon — Human; Minister of Science; Tomas's partner.

Laura Reiss — Human; Fleets Master of the Empire; Adrian's adopted mother.

Nadia Wilson — Human; Minister of Civil Service.

Aileen — Human; Sentinel of the Empire

Oswald Mein — Human; Commander of Fleets.

Nair Hakeem — Human; Fleet Commander of the First Fleet.

Johanna Stern — Human; Fleet Commander of the Third Fleet.

Gotu — Nel; Administrator of Sol system.

Isani — Nel; Leader of Clan Warpath.

Jusan — Nel; Leader of Clan Dai Ven.

Shara Daim

Anessa — Kar Daim of Shara Daim; Dal A'sha to Lord Sentinel Adrian Farkas-Reiss.

Garaam — Dai Sha of the First Legion.

Karoom — Dai Sha of the Twenty-Second Legion.

Horas — Dai Sha of the Twenty-Fifth Legion.

Arisak — Do Sun to Dai Sha Garaam.

Erasi

Hanaru — Gatrey; Weaver of the Erasi.

Garash — Uvaramo; Ancient of the Erasi.

Valanaru — Gatrey; Ancient of the Erasi.

The People

Axull Darr — Ultimate ancestor of the Human, Nel, and Shara Daim races.

Ullax Darr — Axull Darr's twin sister.

Waiss Gast — Best friend of Axull Darr.

RACES

The People — The first intelligent race in the galaxy.

Human — Genetic descendants of the People, engineered by Axull Darr and left on Earth to evolve. Founding members of the Empire.

Nel — Genetic descendants of the People, engineered by Axull Darr and left on Nelus to evolve. Founding members of the Empire; former members of the Consortium.

Shara Daim — Genetic descendants of the People, engineered by Axull Darr and left on Shara Radum to evolve.

Guxcacul — Arthropods, subterranean; former members of the Consortium; Members of the Empire.

Sowir — Aquatic and land based race; former members of the Consortium; Members of the Empire.

Trivaxian — Members of the Empire.

Furvor — Members of the Empire.

Uvaramo — Members of the Erasi; formerly called Loraru; former members of the Union.

Gatrey — Members of the Erasi.

Ssarath — Members of the Erasi.

SHIPS

Empire warships

Empire Fleet — Empire fleets consist of 1200 drones, 400 cruisers, 100 battleships, 10 dreadnoughts, and 1 command ship, for a total of 1711 warships. In addition, every fleet has 289 auxiliary vessels, which include: repair ships, construction ships, ammo ships, military transports, and stealth scout ships; for a total of 2000 ships.

Drone-class warships

Appearance — Uneven boxes.

Size — 760 meters long, 380 wide and 180 tall.

Weapons and defenses — High-powered lasers and kinetic turrets, missile launchers. Railgun point defense, shields.

Cruiser-class warships

Appearance — Resemble sleek talons.
Size — 1000 meters long, 300 wide, 500 tall.
Weapons and defenses — Low-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Battleship-class warships

Appearance — Overlapping carapace-like plates, turtle shell shape design.
Size — 2000 meters long, 1200 wide, 550 tall.
Weapons and defenses — High-powered proton beams, plasma turrets, high-powered kinetic turrets, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields, shimmering field.

Dreadnought-class warships

Appearance — Arrowhead design.
Size — 3000 meters long, 2000 wide, 700 tall.
Weapons and defenses — High-powered proton beams, plasma turrets, ion turrets, high-powered kinetic turrets, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields, shimmering field.

Command-class warships

Appearance — Arrowhead design.
Size — 4200 meters long, 3000 wide, 1800 tall.
Weapons and defenses — Low-powered proton beams, drone control teams. Laser point defense, ability to power both the shields and shimmering fields at the same time.

Shara Daim warships

Shara Daim Legion — Shara Daim Legions consist of 800 destroyers, 600 cruisers, 400 heavy cruisers, 180 battleships, and 20 super battleships, for a total of 2000 warships, plus another 150

auxiliary vessels, for a total of 2150 ships.

Destroyer-class warships

Appearance — Pillar shaped.
Size — 850 meters long, 200 meters diameter.
Weapons and defenses — Low-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Cruiser-class warships

Appearance — Pillar shaped.
Size — 1100 meters long, 400 meters diameter.
Weapons and defenses — Low-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Heavy cruiser-class warships

Appearance — Pillar shaped.
Size — 1400 meters long, 600 meters diameter.
Weapons and defenses — Mid-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Battleship-class warships

Appearance — Pillar shaped, with a widening at the middle of the ship in a shape of a rectangular box.
Size — 2400 meters long, 600 meters diameter of the pillar, 1400 meters wide middle part, 800 meters tall middle part.
Weapons and defenses — High-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Super battleship-class warships

Appearance — Pillar shaped, with a widening at the middle of the ship in a shape of a rectangular box.
Size — 3500 meters long, 800 meters diameter of the pillar, 2000 meters wide middle part, 1000 meters tall middle part.
Weapon and defenses — High-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Erasi warships

Erasi Fleet — Erasi fleets consist of 1000 destroyers, 500 light cruisers, 300 heavy cruisers, 120 battleships, and 30 super battleships, for a total of 1950 warships, plus 120 auxiliary vessels, for a total of 2070 ships.

Destroyer-class warships

Appearance — Saucer shaped.
Size — 800 meters diameter, 120 meters tall.
Weapons and defenses — Low-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Light cruiser-class warships

Appearance — Saucer shaped.
Size — 1200 meters diameter, 200 meters tall.
Weapons and defenses — Low-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Heavy cruiser-class warships

Appearance — Saucer shaped.
Size — 1500 meters diameter, 250 meters tall.
Weapons and defenses — Mid-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Battleship-class warships

Appearance — Saucer shaped.
Size — 2200 meters diameter, 400 meters tall.
Weapons and defenses — High-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Super battleship-class warships

Appearance — Saucer shaped.
Size — 2800 meters diameter, 700 meters tall.

Weapons and defenses — High-powered particle beams, missile launchers. Laser point defense, shields.

Excerpt from Rise of the Empire book 8 — *Hand of the Empire*

Prologue

Year 42 of the Empire — Sanctuary

Jacob Kelly, the former leader of the Earth Resistance, woke inside his cell just as the lights turned on. The word cell was a bit misleading, as the rooms he had been living in were nothing like what the cells on Earth had looked like. His permanent residence consisted of three rooms: a small bathroom, the main room, and a training room. The main room held the bed he slept in, one chair, and a desk with a computer terminal. The training room was twice the size of the main room, with enough room for running and a couple of weightlifting machines. And it had been his entire world for more than twenty years.

In the time since he had been imprisoned, Jacob hadn't seen another person. He received his food and water through the slits in the wall, and over the years he had become convinced that the entire process was automated. The computer didn't have access to any network; he could only access files already on it, which were a large library of books and a writing software which he tried to use but eventually dropped.

It had taken him a long time to make peace with his sentence, and even longer to come to terms with his crime. When the fleet that had come to Earth's rescue returned to Olympus—or the Empire, as it was called by then—Jacob was put on trial for his crimes in the Sol system. He was charged with treason and mass murder. Both charges were true, and Jacob had elected to admit his guilt and accept the sentence from the Empire. He had withheld information concerning the Ra'a'zani, which had indirectly led to the destruction of most of the Empire's fleet and the death of almost the entire population of Earth. That action weighed heavily on him, but at his sentencing, it was made perfectly clear to him that he was not on trial for that crime.

After the Sol system had been won, Jacob had taken control of an old Olympus ship and fired on the mining installations in the Mars asteroid belt, killing thousands of humans who had been brought there as a slave workforce. He had done it because he'd known that those people could not survive without the support from Earth, and that the Empire's fleet was in no shape to take care of them. He'd known that they would try anyway, and in doing so would endanger the survivors from Earth. So he'd done the thing that ensured the survival of the remnants. His punishment was imprisonment rather than execution. He had been put through the immortality treatment, which stopped him from aging, effectively making his imprisonment

unending.

He knew that what he had done was monstrous, but to his mind, it was also merciful. He had spared the Empire from having to choose —a slow death for everyone, or survival of the few. It was a terrible choice, but Jacob had made it fully expecting to be put to death for his crime. And yet he still lived. In a way, it was a far crueler punishment, because Jacob was not a monster. He felt the weight of all those whose lives he had taken; their screams and accusing eyes haunted his dreams every time sleep came.

There were times when the guilt became too much, when he could not bear it anymore, when he was tempted to end his life. But every time he contemplated ending it, he remembered those accusing eyes from his dreams, and he knew that he didn't deserve an easy way out. He would take his punishment; he would spend eternity inside these three rooms.

Jacob got up from the bed and started going through his usual routine, bathroom-training-breakfast. After he finished in the bathroom, he went to the training room for his morning routine. He didn't know if it was really morning, but he did have a clock on one of the walls which showed that it was 06:20. The lights in his rooms always turned on at 06:00 and shut off at 22:00. So he used those times for night and day.

And then when he was finished with his routine, something happened. The wall in the main room slid open, and Jacob was looking at a figure, the first living being he had seen in decades. The figure was dressed in a black armor suit that covered its entire body, with a dark blue coat over it. There was a symbol etched on the armor's chest, the back of a hand with an open eye drawn on it.

Jacob stared in shock as the figure approached him. Then, as it stopped in front of him, a voice spoke out of the armor.

"Jacob Kelly, I am here to give you a choice. You can stay in these rooms, spending eternity here as punishment for your crime. Or come with me, and start atoning for the deaths you caused, by serving the people of the Empire."

Jacob's heart pounded in his chest. He looked at the figure. He knew nothing about what the choice meant. But he did know that he owed it to those he'd killed to do something more than simply survive in an endless and pointless existence. He steeled himself, and gave his answer.

* * *

Year 112 of the Empire — planet Thorsius; Clan Gudólfr territory

Nkiruka held her brother's body in her arms, his lifeless eyes pointed upwards, staring into nothingness. All around her, chaos reigned. People were covered in dust, blood, and debris. Nkiruka closed her brother's eyes, the movement bringing her attention to the gash on her arm and red blood flowing over her dark skin. Somehow, the pain seemed far away, insignificant compared to the horror in front of her. A few meters away, she saw the body of her caretaker, the person that had raised Nkiruka and her brothers and sisters. Around her were the bodies of her remaining siblings.

Her family group numbered seven. All were born from the progeny centers, all had different biological mothers and fathers, and yet they were a family, raised in the progeny programs by their caretaker. And now, on the day that they had finally reached their maturity, when they were to set off into life to find their paths, their lives had ended. Nkiruka looked at the faces of her family; their bodies somehow didn't seem real, their shapes twisted, red, and ugly. Her mind couldn't reconcile the mangled flesh with faces she had grown up with.

The courtyard was filled with the dead. Wails of those still alive echoed all around her, mingling with the cries of pain from those injured but still alive. Then people wearing armor with the symbol of the Hand of the Empire came. One of them gathered her up and took her to a med-car, which carried her to the hospital. Her mind was still filled with the images of her siblings and her friends as the medical personnel put her to sleep.

Hours or days later, Nkiruka woke dazed from the drugs, hearing voices of people talking just outside of her room.

"I can't believe that this is happening here," a female voice said. "This is Gudólfr territory, not the damned occupation zone."

"I know, but ever since the Emperor allowed those from the occupation zone to join the Clans as individuals, we've been having an influx of people. And with all the resentment that the Erasi left behind, it was bound to happen," a male voice spoke.

"The Lord Sentinel should've just destroyed them all."

"You don't mean that. They are people, like us. Only a small percentage have turned to terrorism."

"I know, but seeing kids dead, it gets to me, you know?"

"Me too. The Hand will catch them, they always do."

"Yeah, but there are too few of them, they don't always get them in time."

"Maybe… go… if…" The voices grew muffled as the people walked away.

Nkiruka gazed at the ceiling, thinking about what they had said. She and her brother had wanted to join Clan Warpath together. They

had been preparing for the tests, and now she couldn't imagine doing that without him.

One image kept showing up in her mind, one of people dressed in armor moving through the wreckage—Agents of the Hand. There were too few of them, the voice had said. Perhaps Nkiruka could join them, find and punish the people that had killed her family.

* * *

Year 563 of the Empire — Colony world Santis; Clan Kazalir territory

Vasily was dying. Blood spilled from his stomach as he sat propped against the rock where his murderers had left him. He was so stupid. He knew that he was stupid. He should've listened to Robert when he told him that they should wait for the Hand, but no, he'd wanted to be a hero. He'd grabbed his hunting rifle and gone after the pirates. *So stupid.* And he had even convinced Robert to come with him, and now his lifeless eyes glared accusingly at him from the forest floor. The pirates had played with him, forcing Vasily to watch as they had broken all of his limbs before finally killing him.

And now, Vasily was going to die on this backwater planet alone in the forest, and probably feed some animal after. He shouldn't have agreed to come here, not to a world so close to the occupation zone. He'd wanted excitement, and starting up a new colony had seemed like a good opportunity.

He heard something coming, and dread gripped him. He knew that he was going to die. His legs were broken and his stomach was cut open. However, he did not have a desire to be eaten by an animal while still alive. The noise came closer and closer, until finally he could see what it was. It did not look like any of the animals from this world he was familiar with. It stood upright, with large wings spreading behind it and a black bone-like carapace growing out of its skin to cover most of its body. Its head looked eerily similar to that of a human.

"Help," Vasily managed to rasp out. His mouth was dry and his voice cracked.

The being stepped closer and knelt in front of Vasily. One of its hands moved toward him, and two fingers pressed against his wound, making him hiss in pain. The being pulled his hand back and looked at his blood on its fingers, and Vasily saw the blood seep into the fingers. Then its completely white eyes turned to Vasily, studying him.

"I am sorry," the being said with emotion, and Vasily felt a pressure build up in his head. For a moment, it was as if he was not himself, as if something was taken from him, and then it was gone. "I

am sorry, Vasily," the being said again, its voice sounding familiar, and its body started to shift. The carapace retreating inside its body, his wings curling and collapsing on themselves, his features changed. And after it was finished, Vasily was looking at himself.

"Your wounds are too great to fix, but your death and your life will help my need," the other him said. His hand moved over Vasily's chest and started glowing with orange light. "This will hurt only for a moment."

Vasily felt heat, and pain only for a moment, and then there was nothing.

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